
SPIDER-MAN PS4 HITS NEW HEIGHTS
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ISSUE 200 SPECIAL
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DISCO ELYSIUM
The hard-boiled detective RPG you need to play

We spend a lot of time chasing the present, so we sometimes forget to look to the future or reflect on the past. But that's kind of what this job is all about; you're always being driven by current events or events immediately on the horizon. But what lies beyond? And what sits in our past that we want to make sure we bring with us?

That's what I've been thinking about in the run up to this issue 200 of **games™** and that's what we decided to reflect in this milestone issue. So as you flick through a little further you'll find developers and games industry veterans from across the landscape casting their eye forward and telling us what they think the future will hold. And then, in a special 36-page supplement, we chronicle the 200 Greatest Games Of All Time, reflecting on the very best of our past and how it got us here.

I like to think that the two complement each other pretty well and give you a good insight into the work we we've done for the last 200 issues of the magazine and plan on continuing for the next 200. It's been a long time in the making, but I think you'll enjoy what we've put together to mark this special milestone for the magazine. Here's to the next 200.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



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46 Feature

SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER

We go hands-on with Lara Croft's latest outing and pick out the key facts you need to know



SOON WE WILL ALL BASK IN THE GLOW OF OOBLETS

→ WE TAKE ANOTHER SPIN AROUND BADGETOWN TO SEE HOW DEVELOPMENT IS COMING ALONG

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **DOUBLE FINE** | DEVELOPER: **GLUMBERLAND** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Having had the chance to sit down and play *Ooblets* again, we have to say we're still sitting in the glow of the experience. We don't want to get too overblown about it, because *Ooblets* is a relatively small and easy-going kind of experience that doesn't really suit traditional levels of hype. That said, it is such a gorgeous, laid-back and delightful game to play that we feel duty bound to pass the word along; *Ooblets* is really cool and you're going to love it.

We were still on an early build of the game, so it had its little jittery moments (also it was in the midst of a big convention with hundreds of gamers passing through, so the PC was getting a hefty workout), but the core of what Rebecca Cordingley and Ben Wasser have been creating is firmly in place with regards to art style, customisation, general tools and mechanics and it all combines into something very engaging, but also really relaxing.

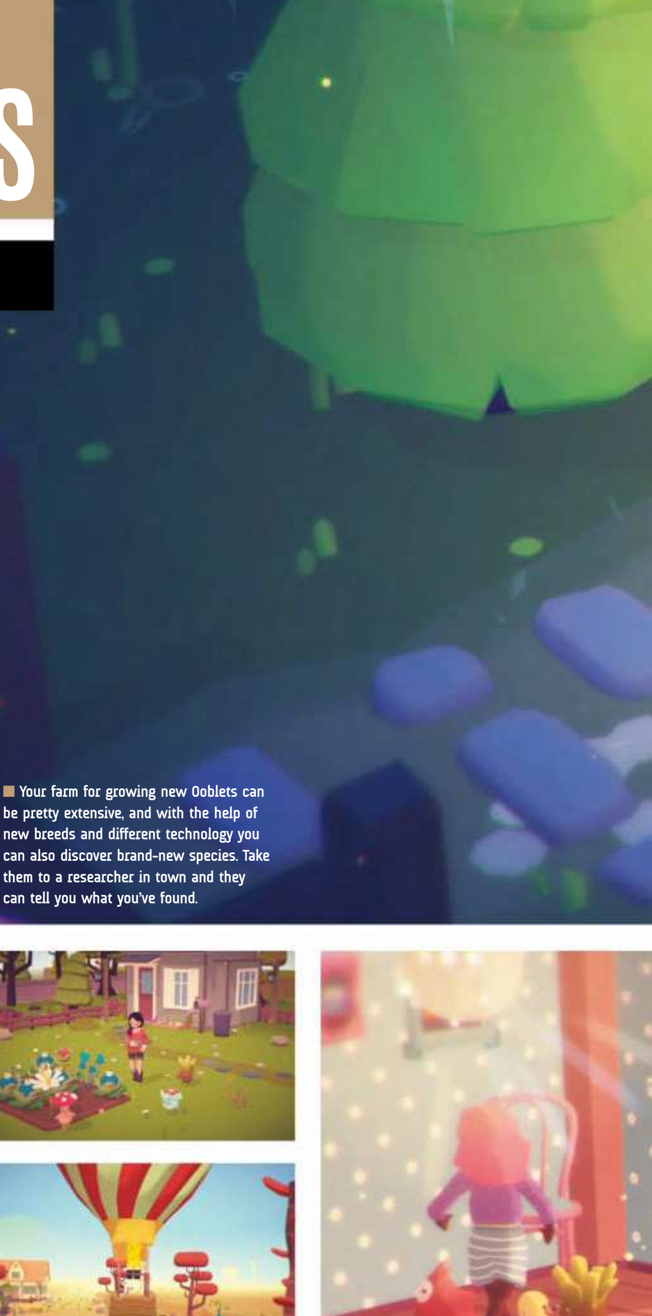
> "EVERYONE JUST SORT OF GETS ALONG AND DOESN'T TAKE LIFE TOO SERIOUSLY. WHAT A WONDERFUL THING THAT IS"

And we really love that about *Ooblets*. This is going to be an amazing Sunday afternoon game or maybe a 'make it feel like Sunday afternoon' game. Jogging around Badgetown we got our first Ooblet, got started on our farm for raising new Ooblets, went into town for some new clothing and hairstyles and then challenged a few street Ooblets to challenges. Everything is really happy and friendly, even the citizens around town, while sometimes a little cocky or brash, become very cordial once your Ooblet has emerged victorious. Everyone just sort of gets along and doesn't take life too seriously. What a wonderful thing that is.

We mentioned customisation there with clothing and hair and those are massive elements of the game, because as much as *Ooblets* is an adventure and creature-collecting game, it's also a social lifestyle game too. Those *Animal Crossing* roots are strong, so personalising your home, trying on different looks for your character and spending your money in shops in the places you visit are all massive parts of the experience with huge amounts of content to pick from. The team has even added in an object placement system for shelves and tables so that you can specify exactly what shelf or side of a table you want to display one of your items. That's just one example of attention to details that Glumberland is bringing.

The Ooblets themselves are naturally adorable, many of them conceived and named with the help of Patreon backers, and each of the creatures has its own set of moves that do different levels of 'damage' to opponents. We qualify the term damage only because you don't exactly hurt the other Ooblet so much as quell them and then they stomp off in a huff and you get their seed as a reward (allowing you to grow one of your own). Interestingly you can also customise your *Ooblets* if you want, giving them hats and such to have a whole little army of critters who look very different from the ones you might see in the wild or in an opposing collection.

So, it's fair to say that we remain impressed with where *Ooblets* is heading. As we understand it, Glumberland still has a fair amount of work to do on the game and isn't putting any specific dates on when it plans to finish, but given all of the systems and designs required to populate this game, we can understand that hesitation to commit in that way. We've thoroughly enjoyed it all so far and we don't expect that to change when it all comes together.



Your farm for growing new Ooblets can be pretty extensive, and with the help of new breeds and different technology you can also discover brand-new species. Take them to a researcher in town and they can tell you what you've found.







IN BRIEF
A magical merging of *Animal Crossing*, *Pokémon* and more to create the ultimate chill-out adventure experience





40 STRONG

Glumberland has set its aim on having 40 Ooblets in the game at launch with 31 already implemented and named. That may not quite be *Pokémon* numbers, but given how varied the designs are and that it only has two people working on it, we think that sounds like a good amount. Plus we would imagine that the team will keep playing around with ideas long after launch as Ooblets strikes us as an ideal game for post-release content like new creatures, new clothing and perhaps even new areas to explore. There are a lot of possibilities laid out in front of this game right now.

HOW SPIDER-MAN AIMS TO WOW US

➔ INSOMNIAC'S HARD WORK IS PAYING OFF FOR ITS NEWEST TITLE

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC GAMES** | RELEASE: **7 SEPTEMBER 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Insomniac has put a lot of care into creating the best superhero title on the market. It's been a while since we've seen a big superhero title come out, and *Spider-Man* is looking to take the Batman Arkham series' throne as the best in the genre. Taking inspiration from the Dark Knight's games while blazing its own trail, *Spider-Man* is not resting on its licence's laurels, and is sure to wow us all come release day.

Meticulous detail has gone into how Spidey controls both inside and outside of battle, and Insomniac is making sure that everything is fluid, yet easy to execute. Travelling around New York City is smoother than ever before, and may be the first game to earn the Spider-Man name to really nail the feel of swinging through the air. But if the high-flying acrobatics aren't your thing, you can also explore the lively city on foot, view the sights and sounds at ground level and interact with the citizenry. *Spider-Man* may be Insomniac's most ambitious title yet, and the company's over twenty years of experience is being well used for this new game.



BRAINS, NOT BRAWN

In order to survive the criminal encounters in *Spider-Man*, you're going to want to rely on clever strategies to survive. Peter Parker may be able to do whatever a spider can, but that doesn't include beating down every enemy to a pulp. Using stealth and Spider-Man's various skills will go a lot farther in combat situations than trying to get by on brute force.

IN BRIEF

An open-world action title from Insomniac that aims to elevate the superhero genre

WEB-SLINGING COMBAT

Combat in *Spider-Man* lets you play by your rules, letting you improvise as you take down criminals. Peter Parker is more than Spider-Man; he's also a genius inventor, and has created a variety of gadgets that combine his web-slinging abilities with helpful technology to assist in crowd control. Of course, you can also use old-fashioned martial arts to dispose of your foes.



SUIT UP

Not a fan of Insomniac's specially designed suit for this game? Worry not, as you'll be able to don a number of different suits in *Spider-Man*. The suits aren't just for looks either, as each one has different abilities and skills to take advantage of. Insomniac has done its homework too, with a wide variety of niche suits from Spider-Man's long and diverse history

"INSOMNIAC'S SUPERHERO GAME STANDS TO BE ITS MOST AMBITIOUS TITLE YET"

SWINGING AROUND TOWN

Arguably one of the most important parts of *Spider-Man* is how you'll be controlling Spidey as he gets around. Thankfully, Insomniac has put a lot of work into making movement around the open world both easy and smooth. Spider-Man can swing from building to building with his web at the press of a button, and also knows a bit of parkour so that traversing on the ground isn't a chore.

IN BRIEF
A digital tabletop game using cards to simulate the trials of staying alive and sane while building a cult





COMPOSITION OF A CULT

→ **A spooky soundtrack sells the cult vibes**

Cultist Simulator's atmosphere is constructed almost entirely by its haunting soundtrack and sound design. The visual design of *Cultist Simulator* is focused, but would be significantly less effective without its fantastic music. Its main theme is a wistful piano tune interspersed with the occasional electronic flare. A wordless choir of voices joins in during another track, lending itself well to the cult themes. The more tense moments of near-death experiences are punctuated by imposing brass instruments and ticking. The evocative soundscape is composed by Maribeth Solomon, returning collaborator from multiple projects previously undertaken by Weather Factory's duo during their time with Failbetter Games. Solomon delivers a series of tracks for *Cultist Simulator* that easily live up to the moody suite she produced for *Sunless Sea*.



SACRIFICE YOUR LIFE AND SANITY IN CULTIST SIMULATOR

→ A SIMPLE CARD GAME OPENS THE DEPTHS INTO DIVERGING CULT STRATEGIES

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **HUMBLE BUNDLE** | DEVELOPER: **WEATHER FACTORY** | RELEASE: **31 MAY 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Time is money. It earns funds and consumes them. More of the former than the latter, if you play your cards right. *Cultist Simulator* is a digital tabletop game of cards in which the clock is always ticking. Madness and illness, both eventually fatal, are rarely more than a few carelessly spent cycles of time away. *Cultist Simulator*'s often obscure directions create uncertainty and anxiety while the marching clock forces the player to keep several plates spinning at a time. It deals in just the right amount of anxious energy for its subject matter, but uses too heavy a hand in obscurity.

Cultist Simulator immediately drops the player in front of the digital table with only two items: a token called 'Work' and a card named 'Menial Employment'. Combining the two adds a ten-second countdown to the Work token, after which it produces a Funds card and a Health card: two valuable resources. Another token appears with the name 'Recall My Dreams' which runs a 20-second timer without any external input.

Though the Menial Employment card was consumed, a bit of experimentation reveals that Health can be played with Work to produce additional Funds. It takes 60 seconds to produce one Funds card and be returned the Health that was invested. It's an inefficient solution for staying alive, but the only one immediately available. After the 'Recall My Dreams' token finishes running, a third token appears: 'Time Passes', which consumes one Funds card every 60 seconds. Without Funds you'll be dealt Hunger and eventually An Affliction, a difficult fate to return from.

Staying alive and founding a fledgeling cult carries on in the same manner as the opening moments. More tokens unlock as you progress, always in the form of action verbs. Cards, always nouns representing resources, ideas and people, are combined with the verbs to produce new cards, and so on. Time always passes, guzzling up meagre Funds. Even after recognising a few patterns and reliable ways to earn Funds, you may find yourself dying of random sickness you don't have enough Health to fight off, or existential dread, which can only be staved off with the scarce Contentment cards.

> "CULTIST SIMULATOR LOVES ENCOURAGING YOU TO STRAY FROM THE PATH, BUT SELDOM LAYS ANY BREAD CRUMBS LEADING YOU BACK"

The struggle to remain barely above the omnipresent threat of poverty and depression highlights a clear division between what *Cultist Simulator* does well and the thing it does worst. Encouraging you to explore new combinations is its natural talent. When picking up any card, the verbs it can be played with to produce interesting results are highlighted in purple. The ones that will be ineffective are white. The system rewards curiosity with new cards and possibilities.

Cultist Simulator loves encouraging you to stray from the path, but seldom lays any bread crumbs leading you back. The Vitality card, when clicked, gives a clear reminder that 'Vitality can be used with Study to gain Health'. Other cards give less obvious tips. Many lack guidance at all. Contentment, a key ingredient for neutralising lethal Dread cards, gives only the phrase: 'I'm happy, I think.' If you've forgotten how you happened upon Contentment in the first place, there's no clear indication of how more might be produced. *Cultist Simulator* could benefit from additional guidance to return players to an effective strategy loop without sacrificing the difficulty already inherent in the system.

Cultist Simulator's subject matter, founding a cult and exploring the mysteries of your own dreams, is dark, but retains a wry levity in its judgement of your actions. The early section of the game can become an uphill battle, as founding a cult takes a back seat to the mundane task of simply remaining alive and healthy, but breaks into an absorbing mid-game full of diverging possibilities – if you have the patience to look up a guide as you play. Although *Cultist Simulator* could stand to better direct players through the basics, the underlying conceit of paring player input down to nouns and verbs is an approachable system that partners well with the esoteric ideas of cult spirituality.



■ Above: The Vitality card provides a useful hint for earning more health, but not all cards include such helpful tips for generating new resources.
Left: Despair is a constant threat. Each Dread card must be neutralised with a Contentment. A stack of three Dread is nearly inescapable and frequently lethal.





DISCO ELYSIUM IS UNLIKE ANYTHING YOU HAVE EVER PLAYED BEFORE

→ THERE'S A WAR INSIDE YOUR HEAD





FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **HUMBLE BUNDLE** | DEVELOPER: **ZA/UM** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **1**

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

1 The name *Disco Elysium* – particularly when combined with its vivid watercolour artwork – may summon the image of some eighties-inspired throwback game. That, we are happy to report, couldn't be further from the truth. *Disco Elysium* is the new name for *No Truce With The Furies*; it's as gritty, incredible and surprising it always was.

A NEW KIND OF CRPG

2 In many respects, *Disco Elysium* is being built in the spirit of classic RPGs. But here's the thing, *Disco Elysium* doesn't *feel* like a throwback. It's actually a hyper-smart and incredibly deep isometric RPG that gives us some idea of how the genre could (and probably should) have evolved were it not for the arrival of full 3D frameworks.

IT'S A CRIME DRAMA AT HEART

3 *Disco Elysium* is simultaneously an urban fantasy, a sci-fi story, and a hardboiled cop drama. It works its influences beautifully, helping to transform the city of Ravachol into a unique playground. The game begins with you awakening to little memory and voices (quite literally) screaming in your head, from there it's up to you how you tackle a massive, sprawling, open-ended murder investigation.

THE VOICES ARE REAL

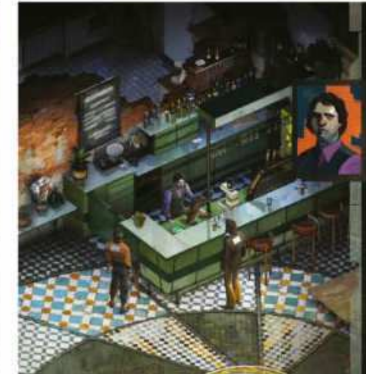
4 We've mentioned the voices, and that's important. *Disco Elysium* doesn't bother with lengthy exposition, instead it drops you in blind to every situation and scenario, with the majority of the information and the detail delivered through conversation and dialogue. Much of this conversation actually takes place within your own head – with the dominant and latent areas of the brain wrestling for control.

THEY ARE TIED TO SKILLS

5 Your various demons wrestling for control isn't just a neat trick, it's also an excellent approach to levelling up and character attributes. Instead of the standard intelligence, dexterity and strength stats you may expect to find in a traditional RPG, *Disco Elysium* instead has you grappling, evolving and pushing back all your mental faculties.

IN BRIEF
A crime drama framed as an isometric RPG with a wickedly smart approach to character, skill and mission design






HOW DOES THAT WORK?

6 It's an original skill system and it can take time to adjust. Think of it this way, every action in the game – be it engaging in dialogue, attempting to pick something up off of a table, or doing something as innocuous as sipping a drink – will have a reaction from your brain, the skill rolls in the game are for deciding whether your rational faculties, intellect and wit, or basest instincts – greed and fear – win.

OPEN QUEST DESIGN

7 As you wrestle with your instincts, with those voices, the game itself will begin to shift around you. If a line of questioning against an NPC is too tough, for example, the authoritarian side of your brain will begin to become more dominant and eventually take over. Should an NPC require a lighter touch later in the game your capacity for calm and quiet dialogue will become surpassed, altering the objective.

IT'S BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN

8 This probably won't surprise you, but *Disco Elysium* is incredibly well written. It's smart and it's funny, never failing to hold the attention and keep us engaged – even through reams of written dialogue, text and the occasional splattering of VO. Honestly, ZA/UM has done truly excellent work in this respect and it's going to make waves throughout the industry, of that we're certain.

NO PLAYTHROUGH WILL BE THE SAME

9 Given how open-ended and truly shapable the game, quest, and character progression are, you should expect *Disco Elysium* to offer an experience that will truly change every time that you play it. Making even the slightest tweaks to your personality will open new lines of investigation, new dialogue options and fresh new ways to experience the game.

IT'S OUT THIS YEAR

10 *Disco Elysium* is excellent. If ZA/UM can keep this level of quality up throughout the entire experience then this will likely be a game that we are talking about for years to come. Looks can be deceiving, and with *Disco Elysium* you're going to need to throw out any assumptions you have of classic RPGs and be ready to have the rule book re-written in front of your eyes.

As you through through *Not Tonight* you'll come up against tales of human tragedy, corruption and exploitation. Which way you choose judge these stories will land you in different places.

PAPERS, PLEASE MEETS DYSTOPIAN BRITAIN IN NOT TONIGHT

→ BREXIT, PLEASE

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **NO MORE ROBOTS** | DEVELOPER: **PANICBAM** | RELEASE: **Q3 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

"Work hard, stay out of trouble, and we might let you stay in the UK." We're going to be completely honest with you, *Not Tonight* presents a somewhat disturbing worst-case scenario of the United Kingdom's decision to abandon the European Union.

This 'post-Brexit thriller' has you taking on the role of a European citizen seeking asylum in the country they once comfortably called home. Trapped in Relocation Block B – a bleak, segregated mess of high-rise flats – you are forced to make a decision: find yourself deported, or take on your new designated role of 'Bouncer' in service of the city. The latter is preferable in this scenario, and so you are set to work managing the entrances to a variety of establishments and destinations across London.

Fans of Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* will immediately get to grips with the style and mechanics of *Not Today*. As people queue to enter a place of business, it is your responsibility to let them in or turn them away depending on a variety of criteria. This can range from the relatively easy – checking date of births on IDs – to more complex tasks like verifying hologram authenticities, expiry dates and nationalities.

IN BRIEF
Get an insight into how horrible England may indeed become in the years ahead in this wicked management sim





Above: *Not Tonight* is certainly going to make some headlines, but it's also going to be worth every one of them. It's fun, smartly written and incredibly provocative.

As you can probably imagine, you'll encounter elements such as racial profiling and blackmail as the game begins to scale up in tension and complexity in its later stages.

At the heart of all of this are the moral quandaries that you'll be thrown up against. The better you do in your job, the more comfortable and luxurious your lifestyle will become – preparing you for a better future. But at what cost? If you spot someone doing something that they shouldn't be, will you throw them into the grasp of the marauding Albion First political party? Or will you risk your own life to help them out of a tight spot? It's these decisions that will compel you through the experience.

Not Tonight is provocative by its very nature. But contained within its web of political messaging – it is incredibly anti-Brexit, if you haven't guessed – is the echo of somewhat heartier British qualities, a cynicism and humour that creates an excellent dichotomy between the bleak situation and the fun you have when trapped within it. "What lengths will you go to survive Britain on the verge of collapse?" is a question *Not Tonight* asks, and it's certainly an interesting one.

In many ways, it's a microcosm of the heartache and pain *Papers, Please* navigated so excellently as it stuck you on the literal border between life or death. Whether *Not Tonight* can achieve something similar remains to be seen, or for that matter, whether it even wants to – we get the feeling that it instead may be perfectly content with putting the mirror up against a decision the country is currently working its way through.







RADICAL HEIGHTS IS CLIFF BLESZINSKI'S ANSWER TO BATTLE ROYALE

→ WITH LAWBREAKERS OFFICIALLY IN LIMBO, BOSS KEY TURNS ITS HEAD TOWARDS ANOTHER POPULAR MULTIPLAYER TREND

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **BOSS KEY PRODUCTIONS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **2019**
PLAYERS: **1 (LOCAL), 100 (ONLINE)**

On 5 April 2018, Boss Key Productions officially acknowledged that *Lawbreakers* – its competitive online shooter – had been a commercial failure, announcing that work on the game was to be suspended while the team shifted its focus to other projects in the pipeline. Only four days later, it announced *Radical Heights*; a battle royale game that was to be released on PC within 24 hours as a free-to-play, Early Access title.

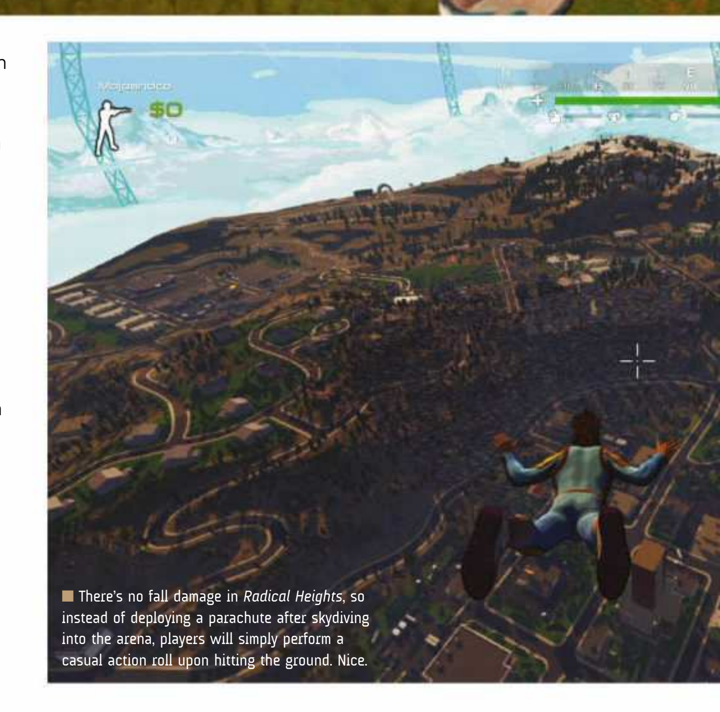
Naturally, people were sceptical. With *Fortnite* and *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* comfortably dominating the already crowded battle royale market, the announcement came across as Boss Key desperately jumping on the bandwagon, not least with a game that looked far less developed than either of those titles. What's more, the low-grade visuals presented in *Radical Heights*' reveal trailer were worryingly reminiscent of the kind of asset-flipped shovelware that sneaks its way onto the Steam Store everyday, lending further credence to the argument that this was a game hastily thrown together at the last minute, rather than thoughtfully conjured up over time.

Launch day woes failed to allay these concerns, as several widely reported bugs and game-breaking issues prevented players from enjoying a smooth experience online, or even getting into a match altogether.

Despite the rocky release, though, *Radical Heights* achieved a higher concurrent player count in its first day than *Lawbreakers* ever had in nearly a year, and the game even broke into the top tier of the Twitch charts during the same week.

That level of interest isn't surprising. While *Radical Heights*' janky production value can't hold a candle to battle royale's biggest hitters, its faster, funkier style of gameplay and handful of novel ideas suggests there's potential for greatness nestled within its underdeveloped infrastructure.

IN BRIEF
Set in an 80s-themed game show arena, 100 players fight to the death in a bid to become the last person standing



There's no fall damage in *Radical Heights*, so instead of deploying a parachute after skydiving into the arena, players will simply perform a casual action roll upon hitting the ground. Nice.



I WANT TO RIDE MY BICYCLE

→ Mullets and minigames aren't the only things letting Radical Heights stand out from the crowd

Radical Heights is a battle royale game first and foremost, but it's also a neat little BMX stunt simulator in its spare time. Players can come across rideable bikes around the map, and hop on them to either get somewhere fast, engage in vehicular combat, or just perform some gnarly tricks at the local skate park. There's even racing minigames that you can take part in to earn more gear and cash during matches, though it's more than likely that someone will shoot you down before you ever reach the finish line, given how vulnerable you are when bike-bound. Health risks aside, though, stunt bikes are just one of the many delightful surprises that *Radical Heights* has up its sleeve. Now, if only Boss Key were to add skateboards into the mix…



Those novel ideas are a welcome by product of Boss Key's commitment to its 1980's aesthetic, which bleeds into every strand of *Radical Heights*' digital DNA. The tacky tone can come across as grating in parts, such as when the player is greeted to the bad jokes of an obnoxious sports commentator every time the game boots up, but the decade of decadence proves its value as a muse for Boss Key to come up with fresh ingredients for the standard battle royale recipe.

Instead of finding weapons in chests scattered around the map, for instance, contestants can win them in game show machines like a Spin-To-Win wheel. The rewards for taking part in these mini-games, however, is cleverly offset by the risks of having their gaudy theme music overwhelm your audio, significantly hampering your ability to hear any encroaching enemy footsteps.

That tension between risk and reward translates into *Radical Heights*' currency system too, as your cash doesn't completely disappear whenever you die, but partly carries over into a permanent stockpile that can either be withdrawn from ATMs in subsequent matches or used to buy new customisation items for your character. Since weapons and gear can be bought from vending machines located throughout the game world with these funds, money thus becomes a hugely important resource for securing the advantage during those early match scuffles.

> "THERE'S ABSOLUTELY POTENTIAL FOR GREATNESS NESTLED SOMEWHERE WITHIN ITS THOROUGHLY UNDERDEVELOPED INFRASTRUCTURE"

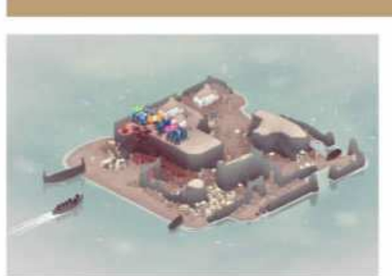
Of course, the more cash you're carrying on your person, the more vulnerable you feel, since you'll always drop a percentage of it upon being killed, which other players can then pick up for themselves. It's here, with this dichotomy, where *Radical Heights* successfully captures the kind of competitive edge that you really want from a battle royale experience.

Even so, it's difficult to wholeheartedly recommend *Radical Heights* in its current state, as Boss Key isn't exaggerating when it describes the game as "X-TREME Early Access". But to disregard it as a shallow *Fortnite* facsimile or throwaway *PUBG* parody would be to gloss over the game's potential as a viable alternative for battle royale fans in the future, assuming what's already there gets optimised to an acceptable standard by the time of a full release.

The threshold for *Radical Heights*' prospects ultimately depends on whether Boss Key can succeed with this game where it previously failed with *Lawbreakers*, namely in cultivating a lasting product that keeps players coming back for more. Achieve that, and reaching those *Radical Heights* of the title might just become a reality for Bleszinski's fledgling studio.

IN BRIEF

A beautifully-crafted strategy game that blends together elements of the real-time tactics, tower defence and roguelike genres with great success







MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

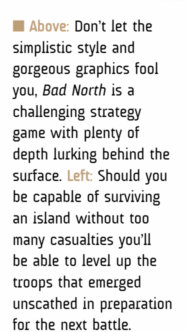
Plausible Concepts is a three-person studio that has been able to distil the essence of real-time strategy into an extremely pure form. In many respects, the team is following in the footsteps of Subset Games here, a two-person outfit that redefined the genre with *FTL: Faster Than Light* and *Into The Breach*. There are, in some respects, some similarities between the studios' games, although *Bad North*'s fantasy setting keeps it feeling fresh and engaging. *FTL* fans may be particularly delighted to see that *Bad North* makes use of a map full of nodes between each battle as your troops get a fleeting moment of rest; with angry Viking warriors hot on your tail, it's here where you can select your next destination as you attempt to make your escape for the area.



REAL-TIME STRATEGY DONE RIGHT IN BAD NORTH

➔ PLAUSIBLE CONCEPTS' THE ART OF WAR

FORMAT: **SWITCH, PC, IOS** | PUBLISHER: **RAW FURY** | DEVELOPER: **PLAUSIBLE CONCEPTS** | RELEASE: **Q3 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**



Above: Don't let the simplistic style and gorgeous graphics fool you, *Bad North* is a challenging strategy game with plenty of depth lurking behind the surface. Left: Should you be capable of surviving an island without too many casualties you'll be able to level up the troops that emerged unscathed in preparation for the next battle.

Some development outfits spend their entire existence trying to stumble upon the magic formula to concoct a truly great game. By all accounts, it looks as if Plausible Concepts is going to nail it on its first try. Sometimes it doesn't matter how simple an idea is, so long as the execution is handled with near perfect precision. That's what we're dealing with here; *Bad North* is a tower defence that feels shockingly refreshing in its approach to the genre. We mean that literally by the way, we were genuinely taken aback by how ingenious *Bad North* is in its approach to every one of its components once we got the opportunity to play it for ourselves.

At its core, *Bad North* has you trying to survive one Viking invasion, contained to one procedurally-generated island settlement, at a time. It's gorgeous to look at and to listen to; its systems are laid out clearly and simplistically, though there's some serious depth hidden there behind the minimalistic presentation. The 'towers' that need defending are the hillside homes of the locals; your army a rag-tag group of island folk that are desperately trying to survive one encounter to the next, there are no reinforcements should they fall; the enemies arrive by sea through the fog of war, assaulting the island with 360-degrees of opportunity at their mercy.

Simple controls let you shuffle your troops around the grid contained beneath the island's grassy surfaces in real-time, giving you the freedom to quickly respond to emerging threats as they appear on the horizon. Every soldier, on both sides of the battle, are individually simulated too, ensuring that there's more to victory than leveraging mere power alone. Skill of the observational variety is vital, particularly as each encounter is effectively a cautious game of rock-paper-scissors. Archers need to be positioned up high to pick off enemies before they get their feet on solid ground; Pikemen need be placed on the beaches to fend off initial waves of the raiding parties, while the sword-and-shield carrying Warriors must be ready to move around the battlefield at will for when all other lines of defence have fallen.

> "IT'S FAST AND SURPRISINGLY RELENTLESS. THERE ARE NO RESOURCES TO COLLECT AND NO NUMBERS TO CRUNCH"

It's fast and surprisingly relentless. There are no resources to collect and no numbers to crunch. There are no bases to build and there are no unit types or soldiers to recruit into the battle. Defend the houses or die trying. That's it; that's the game.

Successfully defending the houses does have its benefits outside of securing a victory and being allowed to push on to the next island. Your soldiers actually persist between battles, and it's the folks living in these structures that will fork over the coin needed to purchase expensive unit upgrades – active and passive abilities that can imbue individual units with new skills and give your army new tactical opportunities in the fights that follow.

Should a village have a hero of its own, they can become a new unit in your army and tag along to the next fight. Surviving raids and keeping your fingers crossed that a village has a unit to spare after the bloodshed is the only form of recruitment in the game. It only helps to raise the stakes and tension between each island. Should all of your troops die, that's it, game over. Interestingly, *Bad North* does give you the option of ditching an island entirely should the situation get too hopeless; in doing so you'll abandon all of the people and potential spoils that the island had to offer, but you'll get to live and fight another day – sometimes that's all you can really ask for.

Bad North works so excellently because it takes a well-worn genre type – the tower defence – and adds in a splash of real-time tactics to the model, and it does so without forcing the player the carry the brunt of those additional systems. There's clearly more than meets the eye to *Bad North* and we're certain that it has the potential to be one of 2018's breakthrough hits when it arrives on Switch, PC and mobile platforms later this year.









91% COMPLETED

THE HOSTAGE

MISSION START



CONFRONT DEVIANT OUTSIDE

MISSION START

Detroit seems to be presenting its scenarios as short vignettes that will later intertwine as each of the three main characters begin to come together. Of course, every story needs to start somewhere and the early parts of the flowchart will give you a handful of incidental decisions to make to get you in the correct frame of mind for the mission ahead.

SEARCH FOR CLUES

In the hostage situation, you are given the opportunity to poke your nose into every corner of a beautiful apartment complex, gaining a better understanding of the unfolding situation before you confront the deviant android. This is a time-sensitive situation, so the longer you spend gathering clues, the harder it might become to save a little girl from certain death.

TAKE THE GUN

Androids aren't allowed to hold weapons, it's against the law in *Detroit*. Some clever recreation and manipulation of the murder scenes will eventually lead you towards a gun that is hidden in the apartment. Pick this up to make your first of many bad decisions – if other characters or members of public see you with a weapon, it too could have broad implications to the story.

DECISION MAKING IS AT THE HEART OF DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

HOW A SERIES OF BAD CHOICES CAN QUICKLY GET YOU KILLED

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT** | DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM** | RELEASE: **25 MAY 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**



***Detroit: Become Human* is about choice and consequence.** That should go without saying; this is a Quantic Dream game after all. What is becoming clearer still, however, is just how much opportunity we are really going to have to shape this wild narrative adventure come 25 May.

One of the loudest criticisms directed at *Heavy Rain* (and, to an extent, its sequel *Beyond: Two Souls*) was that while it spent a lot of time assuring you that its scenarios could indeed play out differently depending on the decisions you made it never really established how, or why, or when this would actually happen. *Detroit*, however, is circumventing this entirely by putting it all in front of you; a fluid flowchart can be accessed from the pause menu at any time, and it cleanly maps out all of the choices that you make as you progress through the game's story – all while still giving you but a hint of what the paths in the story that you either failed to unlock or pursue might have looked like.

It's an incidental addition to the game, but it does work in *Detroit*'s favour. By giving us the ability to track out our progress we'll finally get a real sense of just how bendable this narrative environment is. While the flowchart seen here is a simple example of an early encounter, we have been led to believe that amount of late-game scenarios will begin to push into the triple digits. Settle in, *Detroit* is going to be a choose your own adventure the likes of which we have never before experienced.

NEGOTIATE WITH THE DEVIANT

This is when you use all of the information that you've collected to try and reach an amicable resolution to the standoff. As you can no doubt see on the flowchart, there are a number of different ways this moment can go. Some options are inconsequential, filler to heighten the drama, while others will begin to snake off into new narrative paths.

SAVE THE GIRL

In this situation there are four ways to kill Connor, potentially ending that character's storyline for the rest of the game, and only two ways to save Emma. Ultimately, the two worse ways involve the gun. One has you shooting the Deviant, saving Emma at the cost of drastically affecting the perception the world has towards android hostility.

NEGOTIATE WITH DEVIANT

FRIENDLY APPROACH

COLD APPROACH

FAIL TO NEGOTIATE

REFUSE TO DISMISS HELICOPTER

DISMISS HELICOPTER

BE HONEST ABOUT GUN

LIE ABOUT GUN

SAVE WOUNDED COP

DEVIANT JUMPS WITH EMMA

BE HONEST WITH DEVIANT

LIE TO DEVIANT

BUILD TRUST

SACRIFICE SELF

USE GUN

GET CLOSE ENOUGH

CONNOR FAILED TO REACH DEVIANT IN TIME

CONNOR LEAPT FOR EMMA AND FELL

SNIPERS SHOT DEVIANT

CONNOR DIED PROTECTING EMMA

DEVIANT SHOT CONNOR

CONNOR SHOT DEVIANT

USE THE GUN

This has you attempting to intimidate the Deviant with the gun that you definitely shouldn't be carrying. Following this narrative path will ultimately see you getting yourself shot dead in the process the light fading from your robotic body as the Deviant leaps off the building with Emma, killing them both. It's super grim, reminding us that guns are bad and that every action has a reaction in *Detroit*.



IN BRIEF

David Cage's latest interactive thriller brings choice, consequence and crushing guilt to the forefront of this sci-fi experience

■ If you played Halo's Warzone mode then you may have some idea of the direction *Scavengers* is going, but this is playing out on a much bigger and bolder scale.

SCAVENGERS: A NEW BREED OF FPS

→ JOSH HOLMES RESURFACES AFTER LEAVING HALO BEHIND AND ESTABLISHING A BRAND NEW STUDIO, MIDWINTER GAMES

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **Improbable** | DEVELOPER: **Midwinter Games** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

You left 343 Industries back in 2016; what's been going on, Josh?
I've been pretty stealth for the last year, haven't I? I've been hunkered down in a little group…

Midwinter Games established in late 2016! How has it been?
There were four of us – three of us came from the Halo team at 343. Throughout the course of 2017 we have been working on the concept for *Scavengers* and building the team out; now we are about 17 people and I hope we can peak it out around 25. We are trying to build a small tight-knit group of developers that are all passionate about the game that we are building.

Talk to us about *Scavengers*… what's the deal?
Okay, so *Scavengers* is a multiplayer, session-based game in which players compete to explore, loot, level up and escape a frozen, winterised world. It's set in the not-so-distant future where a cataclysmic event has plunged the world into a new ice age.

What are we talking genre-wise, a shooter?
The core mechanic of the game has a basis in shooting, yes. You know, a lot of us come from a background in the triple-A action-shooter world, where we have worked on things like Halo, Battlefield, Battlefront and Call Of Duty. We are trying to build an experience that brings together elements of PvE and PvP where teamwork and collaboration is really key – where killing other players isn't the only way to win a game.

How important has working with Improbable and its SpatialOS technology been for *Scavengers*?
We are trying to build this really large, vibrant, living world; it has many players, and AI entities are certainly a part of it too. One of the biggest challenges with this is scale: how do we deliver this level of scale while still maintaining that fast-paced, low-latency shooter experience? SpatialOS was an awesome solution for us.

IN BRIEF
Team-based PvP survival shooting is the name of the game as you explore, gather resources, survive enemy AI attacks and take on all comers

What's the biggest challenge you've encountered in attempting to realise this ambitious project?
We quickly run up against the limitations of what you can simulate on a single-server instance. This is something that we dealt with very intimately on *Halo 5*'s Warzone mode.



■ Above: As executive producer of Halo Waypoint and *Halo: Reach*, as well as creative director for *Halo 4*, Holmes played a massive role in the migration of Halo from Bungie to 343 Industries from 2009 to 2016.

We were constantly having to balance the maximum number of players, the maximum number of AIs and how sophisticated their behaviours can be, for example. As we started thinking about *Scavengers*, we knew this would be something we would have to address and find a solution for very early on… as a small team, having the ability to leverage something like SpatialOS to solve those problems is a huge boon to us.

How have you found the leap from triple-A to smaller scale development?
They both have their strengths and advantages. When you are working on a massive-scale project, I think the things that you can accomplish as a team are pretty incredible – but everybody can get very compartmentalised and there's almost like a factory assembly-line method to the production. That's just a necessary way to operate when you have that many people, so that it doesn't devolve into chaos.

For us, as a small team, it's much more like a band jamming. We are building on inspiration from one another and it's like we are discovering the game as we go. It's a little more organic and, as a small team, you can be more nimble to react to some of the ideas and thoughts that emerge through that process.

CAN WARGROOVE SURPASS ITS BIGGEST INSPIRATION?

→ CHUCKLEFISH IS TAKING THE FIGHT STRAIGHT TO INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

FORMAT: **PC, SWITCH, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **CHUCKLEFISH** |
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **Q2 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-2**

We have to confess that we haven't been completely straight with you. While we have indeed reported on numerous occasions in the past that *Wargroove* is practically the modern living embodiment of *Advance Wars*, we aren't certain that that statement is entirely accurate. Not now that we've had a fresh opportunity to sit down with the upcoming title.

It's been 17 years since Intelligent Systems' GBA classic first made its debut and, as it should happen, when a group of hard-working developers spend all that time ruminating on what it is that makes it so bloody wonderful, they may just come up with something that surpasses it entirely. That's right, we're going there; Chucklefish is putting together a wonderful package in *Wargroove,* the charming 2D grid-based tactics game that's scheduled to arrive on PC, Switch and Xbox One later this year.

It's easy to understand why the game has been lauded as a spiritual successor. It is, after all, an extension of the formula, exchanging modern warfare for fantasy battles whilst retaining the same tempered pacing and intoxicating visual style. But there's something about the way that it handles itself – the way that it presents its complex systems and an ever-engaging to-and-fro of tempered warfare – that just feels right. Refreshed and ready to carve out the space to stand on its own two feet independent of any nostalgia that might hold it up.

IN BRIEF
An awesome grid-based tactics game with a focus on army building and tight, expertly-crafted play

While *Stardew Valley* (published by Chucklefish) sought to directly mirror *Harvest Moon*, the development team on *Wargroove* is sprinkling in an extra layer of complexity and challenge to its title to stand it apart from the crowd. One small (and yet oh-so integral) example is the way in which it handles hero units. While it's true, *Advance Wars* did indeed feature characters with special abilities, they weren't units on the ground – directly in the line of fire and liable to receive damage. *Wargroove* brings specialised heroes into play, not only giving you – and a friend, should you be engaged in multiplayer battles – the ability to turn the tide of a fight in your favour, but it also significantly raises the stakes. While these units may be your most powerful asset, they are also the catalyst to continue playing – if they die, then the game will grind to an untimely end.





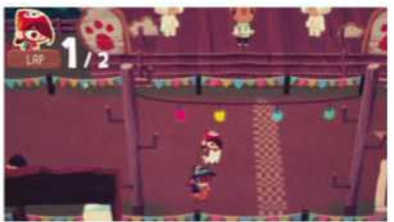


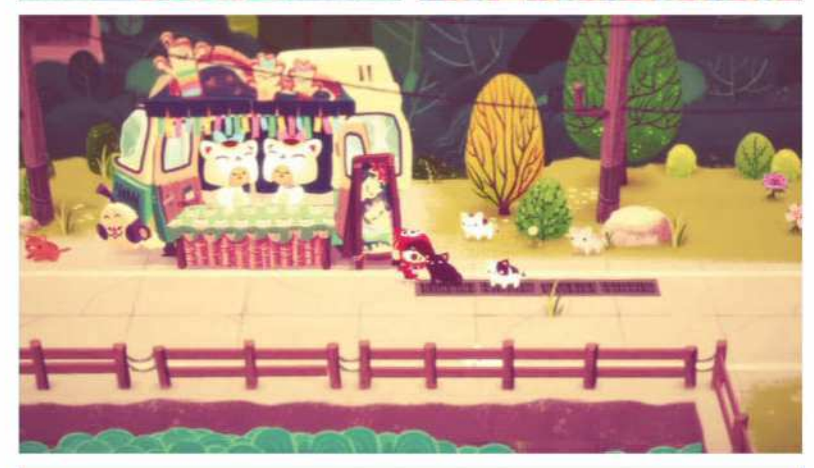
■ Above: *Wargroove* may look like it is little more than a spiritual successor to Advance Wars, but there's plenty going on behind the scenes to make it stand on its own

Chucklefish is also leaning heavily on the inherent creativity its most ardent followers will want to express, building powerful creation tools into the base product. While simplistic on the surface, they will allow players to establish their own maps and units before pushing them out into multiplayer and even campaign scenarios. It ensures that *Wargroove* will live long beyond its initial release, growing as the player base does.

Wargroove is special. It's a delight to play and beautiful to behold. And sure, Chucklefish had one hell of a template to work off of, but there's no denying that it has stepped up to the mantle and will, we're certain, make it quite difficult for Nintendo and Intelligent Systems should they ever decide to have another crack at the beloved series.







THE PURE DELIGHT OF MINEKO'S NIGHT MARKET

→ THEY DON'T COME MORE ADORABLE THAN THIS

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **HUMBLE BUNDLE INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **MEOWZA GAMES** | RELEASE: **Q4 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

We're pretty sure that it is physically impossible (at the very least it is eternally implausible) to walk away from *Mineko's Night Market* without a big, happy grin plastered all across your face. The adorable visual style, the bouncy music, the intuitively designed mechanics and, *ah*, the cats – yes, there are just so many fluffy cats.

Mineko's Night Market may draw some comparison to *Animal Crossing* thanks to its blending of exploration and merchant-moonlighting, but there's so much more to it than that. For starters, it doesn't have you sacrificing your real-life hours in an effort to pay off a virtual mortgage, which in our books is a win.

No, instead the focus of this adventure game is to engage in whimsical quests, meet the wonderful locals, and craft peculiar items in preparation for the weekly Night Market at the base of Mount Fugu. And if that doesn't grab your fancy then you can always spend your time growing cats in your garden – yes, that is absolutely a feature of the game that we honestly did not just make up.

It's weird and it is wonderful. It's over-the-top and it's got a lot of heart. It's kind of silly while still celebrating Japanese culture. *Mineko's Night Market* is an absorbing game that just wants to bring a smile to your face and, trust us, it doesn't have to try very hard to achieve its ambitions.

IN BRIEF
An adventure game inspired by Animal Crossing, but with less emphasis on busy work and more emphasis on story and exploration





EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PATHWAY

→ KEEP AN EYE ON THIS STRATEGY ADVENTURE FROM ROBOTALITY

What is *Pathway*?
It's an all-new strategy game from Robotality, the team behind 2014's well-received TBS *Halfway*. What sets this apart, however, is its dynamic campaign, tight turn-based squad combat, stunning 16 bit-inspired visuals brought to life with pixel/voxel hybrid tech, and a well of secrets to uncover.

What's this about a dynamic campaign?
Ah, we hooked you in! Each time you begin a new campaign in *Pathway* it will procedurally-generate a new map for you to explore and play, introducing unique story encounters and twisting narrative *pathways* (see what they did there) for you to enjoy. It means no two adventures should ever be the same.

The maps and story won't be detailed then?
Au contraire. Not only are we hugely impressed by the complexity of the maps, but Robotality promise that each destination on the campaign will have brushes of hand-crafted content inside to ensure the quality remains high.

How's the combat?
It's fairly familiar turn-based strategy, but it handles well. Fights are decided by how well you utilise cover and your various team-mates against ever-escalating threats on the battlefield.

Okay, so when is it coming out?
Despite being in development since 2016, *Pathway* still has no confirmed release date – though we have been told to expect it to launch for PC in 2018.



GAMES™ 200 IN NUMBERS

→ SOME FUN STATS ABOUT OUR 200TH ISSUE AND OUR 200 GREATEST GAMES LIST

To mark our 200th issue we thought we would dig back through the archives as well as analyse our 200 Greatest Games list to see what interesting data we could pull out. Why? Because numbers are fun, as you should know well enough by now.

So, we thought we would check every review **games™** has ever given, the franchises that have graced the cover most often and from what years the most games in our Greatest Of All Time list appear the most.

We think we found out some interesting data from all of that, so give it a look for yourself



GAMES™ COVER STARS

→ THE MOST FREQUENT FRANCHISES ON OUR COVER

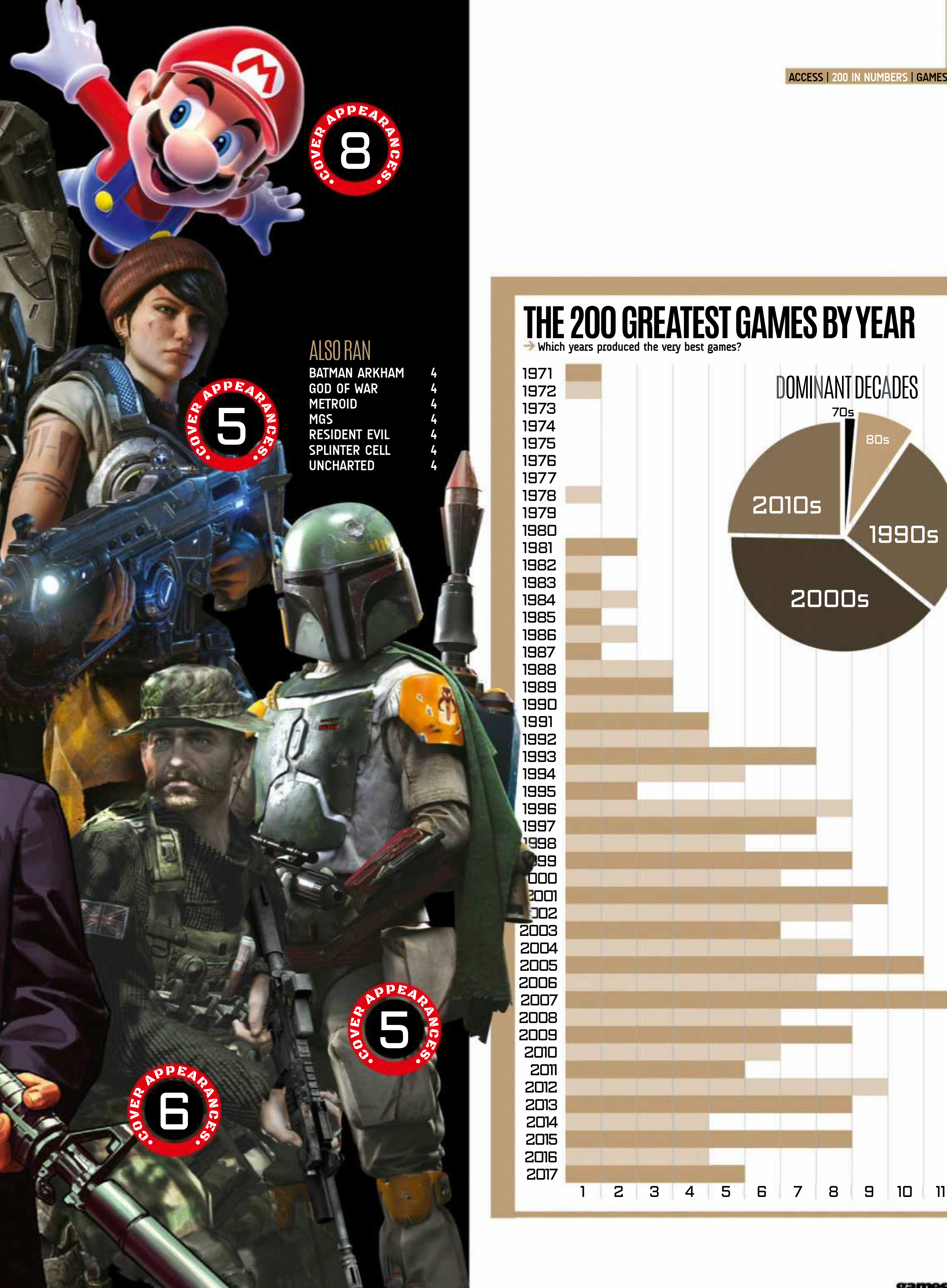
GAMES™ REVIEW SCORES

→ WHAT SCORE DO WE USE MOST?

GAMES™ FIRSTS

FIRST 10/10
METROID PRIME
GAMES™ ISSUE 2

FIRST 1/10
DARKSTAR
GAMES™ ISSUE 118



ALSO RAN

BATMAN ARKHAM	4
GOD OF WAR	4
METROID	4
MGS	4
RESIDENT EVIL	4
SPLINTER CELL	4
UNCHARTED	4



WHY I ♥...

DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

JOSH HOLMES,
CO-FOUNDER, MIDWINTER

I just want to talk about a game that I've been playing a **bunch** *lately, which is* **Deep Rock Galactic***! I love that game so much. I think Ghost Ship Games has found this awesome intersection of style and humour that just works for them, that game has got so much charm to it. As a co-operative multiplayer experience that the different mechanics that they have at their disposal – to support one another as a team – really works incredibly well. I've had a ton of fun playing that with friends lately and I hope the game continues to do really well for Ghost Ship Games as it heads out of Early Access.*



> "I think Ghost Ship Games has found this awesome intersection of style and humour"

JOSH HOLMES, CO-FOUNDER, MIDWINTER





THE FUTURE OF GAMING

THE EXCITING TRENDS, TECH AND DEVELOPMENTS WE'LL BE ENJOYING FOR THE NEXT 15 YEARS OF GAMING

One of the things that drives our love of games is that it's an ever-evolving medium. The industry just refuses to stand still or keep playing within familiar boundaries. With each passing year, we see tech companies and game makers coming up with new concepts, whether individually or in partnership, that send the collective creativity of the rest of the industry spinning off in new directions. There's always a new paradigm-changing event around the corner.

So, as we mark 200 issues and reflect on gaming's past, we thought it made sense to cast our minds forwards to what we might expect to see in games™ issue 300 or 400. Where is the games industry going, how tied is it to the trends or rhythms of the past, and what new ideas are simmering beneath the surface that could change the way we play going forwards? We'll explore it all in the following pages with the help of industry experts.

THE FUTURE IS IN NEW HARDWARE





"Innovation in hardware has always influenced and even shaped how games are played in the future," games industry veteran and CEO and co- founder of Terra Virtua Gary Bracey tells us. "Whenever we see a significant development in gaming hardware, we also see a notable transformation in gaming software – both in terms of gameplay and visuals."

Historically this has tended to feel like the norm. Each new console hardware generation or each new significant leap forward in PC performance opens the door to greater processing power, and creators devise innovative new ways to exploit that potential, coming up with new ideas in the process. Could *Portal* have existed without the processing power of modern machines to create its dimensional gateway mechanics? Could *Minecraft* have existed without the seeding and server technology running its online content?

But it may not be so much about allowing for new ideas as it is about opening up the technology to realise ideas that simply couldn't be fully achieved before. "Advances in technology have always enabled us as developers to more fully realise our vision," is Jeff Kaplan's take as game director of *Overwatch* and vice-president at Blizzard. "As hardware continues to evolve, new doors will be open to us to revisit ideas and pioneer new territory."

"I'D GO SO FAR AS TO SAY VR REPRESENTS THE MOST DISRUPTIVE POSSIBILITIES SINCE VIDEO GAMES FIRST CAME ONTO THE MARKET"

Which is in part why we are always hungering for new hardware, hoping to see how it can open up the imaginations of game makers. "New hardware opens up enormous creative possibilities, and I truly believe VR presents a sea-change in games, as it offers an entirely new way to interact, particularly regarding multiplayer," adds Bracey. "In fact, I'd go so far as to say it represents the most disruptive possibilities since videogames first came onto the market. This is one reason why I'm so excited about Terra Virtua, as it offers a platform for such creativity to flourish and become mainstream."

So where is hardware heading next and what could it inspire? We'll take a closer look at VR in a moment, but let's look at the big manufacturers first.





STREAMING FOR ALL

1 Microsoft has taken great strides with its Game Pass program, and deciding to make all of its first party exclusives available from day one on its subscription service is a bold move that's going to grab attention. We fully expect that Sony will look to follow suit, if not now then at least in time for the launch of any PS5 machine, and we should keep an eye on Steam too.

MORE VR SUPPORT

2 PlayStation has done pretty well with VR so far, even if it hasn't managed to launch a killer app that makes the technology essential. Increased processing power on a next generation of consoles, along with wireless technology, might be the two missing ingredients that make it a much more viable option. And we expect Microsoft may follow.

PHYSICAL MEDIA WILL HOLD ON

3 We understand from recent appearances by Sony at conferences that it isn't moving away from physical media just yet. Why? Because it doesn't want to abandon developing markets where internet access isn't guaranteed. In these regions, having your games on discs is pretty important, so don't expect digital downloads to take over just yet.

A FUTURE FOR HANDHELDS

4 Nintendo doesn't seem sure what to do with the DS now the Switch offers handheld gaming with home console power, but we have to wonder if Sony and Microsoft will review their position. Is the time ripe for a new PSP? Could Xbox Portable resurface as a concept? We're not convinced. That said, we think an entry-level, kid-friendly, affordable handheld still has a role to play.

TIERED HARDWARE OPTIONS

5 One of the elements we've seen from the half-step console releases of the PS4 Pro and Xbox One X is that there is now a tiered structure to how you buy a new console. You have a premium and budget option, but you can play all of the same games. While the next generation may not launch like this, we would expect similar half-step upgrades to become the norm in the years that follow.

THE FUTURE IS IN CREATOR INNOVATION

Hardware isn't everything. What you need for real innovation is new ideas, and that can just as easily come without a big technological leap as a catalyst. David Braben OBE, for one, believes that the relationship between new ideas and tech is one we've left behind us now. "There are new media – currently VR being the most obvious one, and AR too – where specific games or play styles are enabled (or at least augmented) by the hardware, but these are not the norm," the Frontier founder and CEO tells us. "Most games are not closely tied to hardware now as they once were."

Jean-Francois Major, co-founder of Tribute Games, maker of *Mercenary Kings* and *Flinthook*, seems to agree. "The evolution of games seems to be tied to what developers can tinker with and the gamers' appetite and desire to try new things," he tells us. "Recent hardware innovation did not bring us MOBAs, battle royales, or even all those [insert boring day-to-day activity] simulators."

"RECENT HARDWARE INNOVATION DID NOT BRING US MOBAS OR BATTLE ROYALES"

Certainly the biggest breakout moments of gaming in more recent memory have been around genre or mechanics rather than technical prowess. The hardware has been a base, but not necessarily a big deciding factor when really all we're seeing is incremental improvements to performance. "Games have continued to improve, enabled by the hardware, but I wouldn't say it is necessarily tied to hardware innovation, in the same way I don't think TV or film are tied to improvements in consumer hardware like 4K, 8K, 3D, HDR, Dolby Atmos, 7.1 etc – even though it does improve the quality, and might create some good marketing opportunities," Braben adds.

And some of the best examples we've seen of real innovation venture way outside the usual genres or mechanics we expect from games, as Major points out. "Innovation comes from these games you can't put into any genre. *Keep Talking And Nobody Explodes* comes to mind, or *My Summer Car* (what is up with this game?!). These games are venturing into unknown territory."

STUDIOS TO WATCH



BLIZZARD

Nothing is done by half in the house of Warcraft. When the developer turned its hand to first-person shooters, it didn't follow in the footsteps of what was popular now; it chose to create something fresh in *Overwatch*, a game that continues to push boundaries and bring players together. Whatever it chooses to tackle next, you can bet it will be truly groundbreaking.



MEDIA MOLECULE

It created the concept of Play, Create and Share with *LittleBigPlanet*, and now it's taking that concept to the next level with *Dreams*. This is a game experience that's all about empowering us as players to unleash our imagination in the most accessible and egalitarian way possible. As we see the boundaries for creating games fall, *Dreams* could be a world-changer.



NINTENDO EPD

Let's have a quick rundown of the Entertainment Planning & Development division's most recent output: *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, *Arms*, *Super Mario Odyssey* and Nintendo Labo. Seems to us that when it comes to experiences that break moulds and create new standards, you should look no further than this Nintendo group.

GAMES AT THE CUTTING EDGE

UPCOMING RELEASES THAT COULD SHAKE UP THE INDUSTRY

CRACKDOWN 3

With its promise to draw on the power of Microsoft's Azure Cloud network for additional computational work, *Crackdown 3* is promising possibly the most destructible online multiplayer environment ever created. Its potential for the future of cloud-connected gaming is limitless.

ANTHEM

BioWare moving into the world of shared world shooters should be exciting to everyone. If *Anthem* can put its best foot forward in terms of narrative design and give us a vast world to experience then it could well top the efforts of Bungie and Ubisoft before it. The facial animation is superb too.

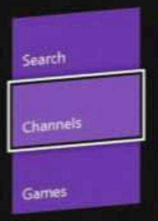
BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2

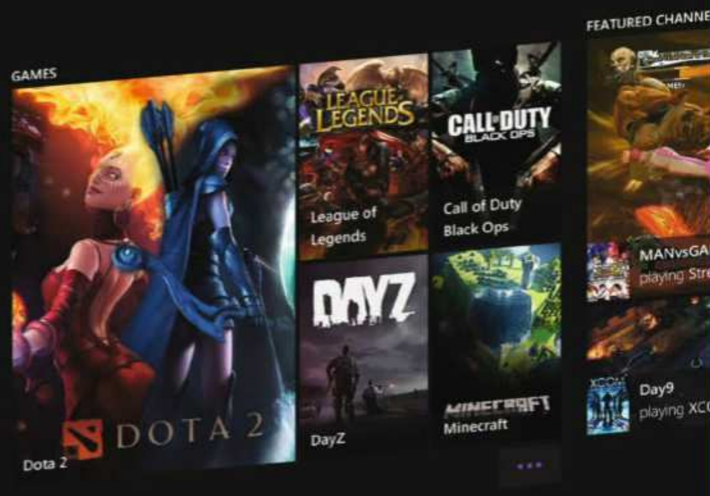
Not content simply with bringing back a cult classic action adventure, Michel Ancel is shooting for the moon. And then he's shooting for some other stellar bodies too with a space pirate epic that will see you travel from alleyways to the stars without skipping a beat.

STAR CITIZEN

An insane feat of crowdfunding matched only by its insane ambition, if *Star Citizen* can ultimately deliver the kind of interstellar exploration, trade and combat experience it has been working towards, we'll have to set a new bar for what games can achieve in the modern era.







THE IMPORTANCE OF STREAMING

WHY PLAYING GAMES IS BECOMING AS IMPORTANT AS MAKING THEM

One of the biggest trends of the last five years has been the growth of live streaming play sessions on Twitch and YouTube, something that the industry would have been hard-pressed to predict, and has generally been slow to adapt to. However, being able to watch someone play a game is now a massive part of the appeal of a new game, and that's something *Overwatch*'s Jeff Kaplan thinks we should be looking to as a big area for expansion and innovation going forward.

"I think the most notable change happening in gaming right now is the influence of streaming and viewing and the generational shift towards the streaming culture," he explains. "For many, watching games is as fun as playing games. As developers start to embrace the concept of streaming and viewing, it opens the door for new and exciting design space to be explored.

"I personally believe that the next big trend in videogames will be the adoption and embracement of streaming culture with games designed to maximise the experience for the streamer, viewers and other affected players."

So what would that look like? Well, building games with the spectator in mind from the beginning is an important place to start. Having non-player camera options and controls that will allow viewers to either get a different view of the action or customise their view how they see fit. As bandwidth opens up, why not have everyone be their own camera operator as they watch, focusing in on whatever they think is important? These are big additional challenges for developers.

"WE ARE LIKELY TO SEE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PLAYERS AND GAME DEVELOPERS GET TIGHTER AND CLOSER"

David Braben sees this as a trend with a lot of potential. "We are likely to see the connection between players and game developers get tighter and closer, and new kinds of game emerge where players are closely involved in the whole process," he tells us. "We will see tighter integration of streamed video – similar to Twitch and YouTube Gaming today – and different kinds of interaction."

DEVELOPMENT FOR THE MASSES

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW HOW TO CODE ANYMORE?

Games like *LittleBigPlanet*, *Super Mario Maker* and *Roblox* have helped massively in demystifying the process of developing a game from concept to execution. These playgrounds of creativity have opened up possibilities for us as players to really make and share something that wouldn't have been a possibility for us before without a fair amount of coding and programming knowledge.

"With the likes of *Minecraft* and *Roblox*, we've seen the innovative thinking that can be produced when you put easy-to-use tools in the hands of regular gamers," says Gary Bracey of Terra Virtua. "Once you eliminate the barriers to entry so people no longer have to depend on programming knowledge or graphic creation to build a game, then you can really tap into the imagination of people who can more easily bring their ideas to life."

That's now led us to new game development tools that are easy to understand and simplified for inexperienced game makers to get into. But that's something that may only expand further in the coming years.

"I strongly believe the tools we use to make games and access to game assets will get easier to use and integrate," says Tribute Games' Jean-Francois Major. "Where making games used to be about technical feats, the emphasis will hard switch to the creative side."

Things like RPG Maker and GameMaker Studio offer even greater levels of depth to the creation process for those of us with much more limited expertise than your average developer, but could it go even further? That's something Bracey is now exploring.

"In partnership with the Unreal Engine, we are developing something called Terra Forma, which will give access to games creation to everyone, based on the most powerful 3D engine in the world," he reveals. "A suite of simple but powerful tools, which will allow everyone the means to bring their imagination to life within our platform."

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

GREAT EXAMPLES OF EASY-TO-USE DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

TWINE



We really do love Twine for bits of interactive storytelling. It's a great way of understanding how narrative choices can be interwoven to create much more in-depth and compelling stories. And it is still used by really experienced and celebrated game makers. Take *The Temple Of No* by Crows Crows Crows, for instance. A very funny and engaging use of the tools Twine offers.

GAMEMAKER STUDIO 2



Soon to be launching its Switch support, GameMaker Studio asks you for a little more knowledge of how to make a game, but still not as much as if you were jumping into an engine blind. The tools here will allow you to make a massive amount of highly personalised content. The big examples here remains games like *Hyper Light Drifter* and *Death's Gambit*.

IS VR THE FUTURE OF GAMING?

IT'S HAD A STRONG OPENING, BUT CAN IT SHORE UP ITS POSITION AS THE FRONTLINE OF INNOVATION?

"While VR is an exciting platform that offers the potential for more immersive experiences, we're still some way off it being the radical change that many people have suggested it would be over the past couple of years," says Creative Assembly technical art director Jodie Azhar, and we have to agree. While we've enjoyed a lot of the output on PSVR, HTC Vive and Oculus Rift in particular, nothing in the VR space has struck us as truly essential just yet. But change could be coming.

"I believe immersive realities generally will turn the existing traditions of interactive entertainment on its head," insists Terra Virtua CEO Gary Bracey. "It might take a year or two, but undoubtedly a whole new genre will be created, offering more accessibility to the many who don't yet play 'proper' videogames."

"ANOTHER REASON VR HAS SO MUCH POTENTIAL IS BECAUSE IT COMBINES BOTH TRADITIONAL GAMING AND ASPECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA"

So what's been getting in the way of this happening so far? What are the last wrinkles that need ironing out? "There are a few reasons for this, such as price point – VR headsets are still expensive for the average consumer; health and safety – there's still a big issue with nausea and eye strain; discomfort – most headsets are quite bulky, and people don't want to wear them for extended periods of time," points out Azhar. "I'm excited about the possibilities for what VR can offer once these issues have been tackled, but until we make these breakthroughs, I think we're going to continue seeing a slowdown in the appeal for VR in games in the near future."

Bracey thinks that a largely untapped aspect of VR might still provide a breakthrough, though. "Another reason VR has so much potential is because it combines both traditional gaming and aspects of social media. Now that VR hardware is reaching a point where it is no longer so cumbersome, players can experience incredibly rich digital worlds while interacting with people in their neighbourhood or across the world. The possibilities are exciting, and only limited by our imaginations."

WHAT VR NEEDS

KEY CHANGES ON THE WAY



LOWER PRICES

This one will take more time, as right now the technology is still expensive to produce, and therefore relatively expensive to retail. If VR can keep interest simmering for another couple of years though, costs may drop enough to make it much more competitive.

HIGHER RESOLUTION SCREENS

Vive and Rift have thus far offered the best visual experience for VR, but the pixel density of the screens is still a little below what we would want. Higher resolutions should smooth out the fuzzy look many games have in VR.

LIGHTER WEIGHT

The weight consideration is something that typically improves over time as miniaturisation improves and components can come down in size. VR headsets aren't as cumbersome as they used to be, but they could still improve.

WIRELESS HEADSETS

There's been some experimentation with this, and the Vive Pro and Oculus Go will provide wireless headsets going forward. This needs to become the industry norm, though in the coming years.

ALL EYES ON AR

AUGMENTED REALITY IS STILL ON EVERYONE'S MINDS

"I'm really curious to see what comes out of AR," says Tribute Games' Jean-Francois Major. "I feel like no one really figured out how to properly use AR. I wish I had the answer to this one, but I know it's not overlaying a game world in your living room."

He's right; augmented reality can and should be a lot more than that, and we're already seeing some of that in the most popular games of the last few years. *Pokémon Go* was a huge step forward for the visibility and popularity of AR gaming, bringing the creatures to life not only on screen, but in the world around us.

"Games will trial other forms of AR (eg handset AR, as in *Pokemon Go*) more and more, but the huge opportunity is when it is absorbed into glasses, and ultimately into implants, but I suspect that will be more than ten years away," says David Braben, with a near cyberpunk vision for what the future of AR could hold. That kind of integration into our daily lives would be a big step up from where we are right now, but the acceleration with which new technology emerges and finds traction means we wouldn't scoff at his timeline prediction.

But what about right now? Can AR get a foothold immediately? Gary Bracey is betting on it with his Terra Virtua project. "We are not only focused on VR, but also actively building a strong AR component to the platform as well. We are developing a mixed reality app that enables users to stay connected to Terra Virtua even when they are on the move, and our platform will feature content specifically designed for AR as well," he tells us. This kind of broader thinking may be the next natural evolution of what AR can bring to gaming.



HOLOLENS

HOW IS MICROSOFT'S HEADSET COMING ALONG?

From what we can tell, Microsoft's HoloLens augmented reality headset is still firmly in the connecting and testing phase at the moment, but that phase continues at pace. Recent reveals of UI tests continue to show impressive levels of accuracy and image stabilising as objects float in the headset wearer's view, and can be touched as if they were really in the world around you.

We would imagine the demands of processing something like this currently sit outside what is plausible within the body of the glasses alone or even from an Xbox One X, but perhaps in another generation some console integration might be possible.

A MORE REPRESENTATIVE MEDIUM

HOW DIVERSITY OF MAKERS AND PLAYERS IS GROWING



Representation matters. It matters because it brings more voices into the industry and into the world of gaming, and that's important because more gamers means a stronger community, and a stronger community means more games. A more diverse industry means more perspectives, and with so much of what we love about games being the escapism of the experience, more diverse perspectives can only be good for the creativity of the projects that come our way. So representation matters, and it's a big way in which the industry will be changing going forward.

"I hope that we see more investment in diverse games and the building of diverse teams," says Creative Assembly's Jodie Azhar. "Despite a much wider range of game genres and experiences being available now than ever before, we're still seeing a lot of the more experimental games being developed by independent developers, and a lot of the larger investments are still going toward games that are seen as less risky, because they stick within an established genre with defined 'gamer' user bases."

Jeff Kaplan is hopeful though, especially as he sees another generation of game makers emerge. "I am fortunate in that I get to visit with a lot of up-and-coming game students from various universities," he explains. "I think there is so much talent in this generation, and I know they will make amazing games. The level of diversity in terms of who they are and the types of games they want to make is so promising for all of us as developers. I can't wait to make games alongside of them, and I'm very much looking forward to learning from them."

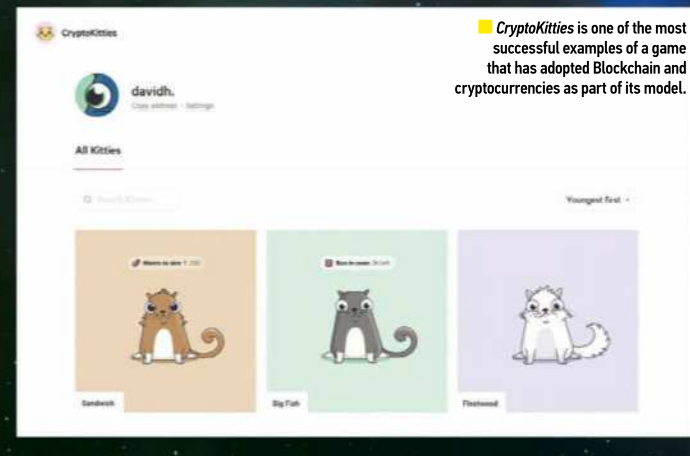
"LOOKING AT THE DIVERSITY OF PEOPLE PLAYING GAMES, I'D LOVE TO SEE US GET RID OF THIS IDEA OF A 'GAMER'"

Diversity goes beyond upbringing and outlook, and also to what we even consider to be a gamer in the first place. "Looking at the diversity of people playing games, I'd love to see us get rid of this idea of a 'gamer', or that there are casual and hardcore players, and realise that anyone who plays games is a legitimate consumer in the same way you don't need a special identifier to say you enjoy watching films," says Azhar. "Games can be played and appreciated by everyone, and I'd love for the enjoyment and discussion of games to be a much more inclusive environment."

BLOCKCHAIN AND GAMING

FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HOW THIS TECH COULD CHANGE GAMING





CryptoKitties is one of the most successful examples of a game that has adopted Blockchain and cryptocurrencies as part of its model.



If a game like Call Of Duty were to adopt a Blockchain model or even create its own cryptocurrency that could have a massive impact.

YOU'RE THE OWNER

1 So, breaking down things to the basics here, Blockchain is essentially peer-to-peer file sharing gone large and super encrypted, but what that means for you is there's no middleman holding onto your data or leasing you access to the things you make (profiles, characters, save data, etc.). It belongs to you, giving you the power over it, including the option to sell it if you wish.

CROSS-PLATFORM IDENTITY

2 Since it all belongs to you, you're also able to take it anywhere you like. So create an avatar in one game, build up credit in a particular service, and there's no reason why that shouldn't be transferable to something else. It creates the opportunity for massive shared experiences across platforms, titles and apps.

TRADING DIGITAL CONTENT

3 Since the Blockchain system keeps records of transactions, if you buy something it belongs to you, period. No one can copy it or fake it. It's yours. So if you were to buy a digital game using Blockchain, you basically have a proof of purchase built in. And now, you could theoretically sell that on. Yes, we mean digital trade-ins are perfectly plausible within Blockchain creating a digital second-hand market.

NOTHING HAS TO DIE

4 Blockchain is decentralised and open source, so files are simultaneously stored and encrypted in multiple locations. If a game launched its online platform through a Blockchain, that would mean the community essentially protected it. If the developer went bust for some reason or moved on, the game could be running for as long as the players kept it alive.

IT'S SECURE

5 Blockchain has been used to transfer cryptocurrencies for years now, and by encrypting every piece of data and then bouncing it around a decentralised network of nodes, it's all but impossible to hack, from what we understand. That should mean better data protection for us as consumers, and possibly more stable networks for gaming.

HOW BLOCKCHAIN WORKS

COMPUTER
A transaction is requested by a user

BANK OF SERVERS
This is sent to a peer-to-peer network of computers referred to as nodes – the transaction is validated



A BLOCK FORMED
The data from the transaction is combined with other data to form a Block

BLOCKCHAIN
The Block is added to the Blockchain permanently, meaning it cannot be altered. The record of the transaction is now permanent and traceable





THE NEW MIDDLE

MORE AFFORDABLE GAMES BELOW THE TRIPLE-A ARE GAINING TRACTION

We've been in something of a tumultuous and vicious cycle in recent years with triple-A titles. The cost of making games and maintaining gigantic development teams that can turn around a triple-A experience in two to three years goes up and up, and the price on the shelves has remained pretty steady. As a result, publishers have been trying to find new revenue streams to offset those costs in a way that makes the expense make sense while also being attractive to us as gamers. In-app purchases, loot boxes and more have been tried to mixed receptions. If the design of such purchases is off in its intention or results by even a little bit then we tend to not be too happy about the additional investment being asked of us as players (*Star Wars Battlefront II* being the most recent example).

But in the face of all of this we've seen something new emerge. Or perhaps more accurately, we've seen something old reemerge with games that sit just below the triple-A tier in terms of budget and ambition given new life. The rise of publishers like THQ Nordic, who recently purchased Koch Media, shows us that there's a path for high-quality games that are operating a little outside of the system to find an audience. It's not that these games aren't high-quality productions; it's just that triple-A is moving forward so fast it's leaving a lot behind that can still work. And if these games are made a little more cheaply, they don't need to rely on post-release sources of income. They can be fairer to us as gamers and still turn a profit to keep making games. With THQ Nordic growing and other smaller publishers emerging, this could be a big area of growth as an antidote to the ever-swelling triple-A scene.



CROSS-PLATFORM PLAY

THE FUTURE OF ONLINE GAMING, AND IT'S ALREADY STARTED

On 12 June 1987, President Ronald Reagan famously said, "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Over 30 years later, and it feels a lot like the games industry is calling for something similar: an end to hostilities between platforms and the beginning of open borders for multiplayer gamers. We're beginning to see the early beneficiaries of it through *Rocket League*, *Minecraft* and even *Fortnite* being playable across PC, console and smartphone, but more can be done.

"*Fortnite* and *PUBG* recently made a huge impact on gaming by having cross-platform experiences that spanned the PC, consoles and mobile," says *Overwatch* director Jeff Kaplan. "Cross-platform experiences, especially in social games or games with persistent progression, are very exciting."

> "CROSS-PLATFORM EXPERIENCES, ESPECIALLY IN SOCIAL GAMES OR GAMES WITH PERSISTENT PROGRESSION ARE VERY EXCITING"

The only real barrier to this thus far appears to be Sony, which prefers to keep cross play limited to PS4 with PC and not much else. Why won't it support playing with Xbox and Switch players? Perhaps because it's the market leader, and doesn't feel the need to give its competitors a helping hand. Cynical perhaps, but an understandable position if that's the case. We know it's possible though, as Epic accidentally connected PS4 and Xbox One players on *Fortnite* for a few hours in October 2017.

"I hope to see platforms open up and embrace the way players want to play more," adds Kaplan. "The technology and desire exists. I believe it would be beneficial to everyone to open platforms up more to bring players together. So I'm definitely hoping for more cross-platform opportunities."

PIONEERS OF CROSSPLAY



ROCKET LEAGUE

Rocket League broke new ground when it secured the ability for PC players to be matched with either PS4 or Xbox and Switch players. Now, it is planning crossplay party support this year, adding another string to its bow.



FORTNITE

We have to say we've been blown away by the strength of *Fortnite*'s mobile experience, and the fact that you are sharing the game world with players on PC and Mac is absolutely stunning. It just works so well.



MINECRAFT

Mojang got to work on shared data nice and early, allowing players to visit their little shard of *Minecraft* from any device, so it made sense that playing it and sharing the experience with other platforms would follow.

MORE GAMES WITH SUBSTANCE

AS BAFTA HONOURS 'GAMES BEYOND ENTERTAINMENT', WE LOOK AT HOW THE MEDIUM CAN PUSH FURTHER



Recently, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts held its annual game awards, and introduced a new category, Game Beyond Entertainment. As BAFTA put it, the award was, "introduced to recognise games that deliver a transformational experience beyond pure entertainment." The winner was *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* for its exploration of mental illness. But the fact that an institution like BAFTA is recognising such work says a lot about where the games industry is and where it could be going.

"I think games that cover real-world issues have been around for a long time, and should continue, too," says Frontier founder and CEO David Braben. "*Hellblade* was a worthy winner… Issues like bullying and bad behaviour can happen within multiplayer games as we all know well, and developers put a lot of effort into reducing and ameliorating some of this bad behaviour."

Taking some degree of social responsibility has been a tricky business for gaming, typically because when it comes up it is in a confrontational situation, such as violent games being implicated in real-world violent behaviour. But when everyday behaviour spills into games, developers can act, just as they can feel more confident in treating real-world issues more directly in their narratives and mechanics.

Social responsibility is something we know Blizzard's *Overwatch* team takes very seriously, so we were keen to get director Jeff Kaplan's take on this.

"IT'S BECOMING MORE AND MORE OF A REALITY FOR PEOPLE TO EXPRESS THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES USING OUR MEDIUM"

"Games have transcended into mass culture at this point, and are widely accepted as entertainment and even art," he tells us. "With the increased accessibility of game-making, it's becoming more and more of a reality for people to express their life experiences using our medium… We know we have a voice in society, and I believe many of us are trying to use that voice for positive and constructive influence. It's nice to see BAFTA recognising those efforts."

So where can this go? We hope there's confidence that there's not only awards recognition, but also an audience who enjoy it. "I'm hopeful that we will see this side of game development grow," says Jodie Azhar, technical art director at Creative Assembly. "Games are an excellent medium for building knowledge, empathy and understanding, as the interactivity of games makes them a much more immersive experience than films or television in that the player often needs to give input to progress the game, and so has a stronger personal connection to the actions being performed and the outcome of the experience."

"The various mediums of entertainment will become more closely related," Terra Virtua CEO Gary Bracey insists. "The ability to have an even stronger narrative element in games has certainly made an impact already, but the social aspects of genres such as Escape Rooms and real-life simulations promote a stronger social aspect for more collaborative-type experiences." So perhaps a blurring of lines between mediums is where this is really all heading?

"What I expect – and would like to see – is closer integration between entertainment media," Braben adds. "This is likely to create new forms of media too, including new kinds of entertainment. We may possibly cease to see our industry as the 'games industry' but as part of the broader 'entertainment' industry – although games as we know them will continue to exist in this wider context."

TRENDSETTERS



HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

1 Ninja Theory's game picked up a swathe of BAFTA awards this year, and its Game Beyond Entertainment win was a big one. Its use of sound design and mixing live action with animation created an audio and visual landscape that really immerses you in a series of potentially psychotic episodes that Senua is experiencing. An incredible piece of work from a small team.



THAT DRAGON, CANCER

2 An utterly heartbreaking story, beautifully told, *That Dragon, Cancer* was inspired by the real-world experience of losing a child and the highs and lows of life under such a diagnosis. It's a stunning game, not least for the strength and bravery of its creators Ryan and Amy Green, who lost their son Joel. It's a powerful example of game as autobiography.



THIS WAR OF MINE

3 Most war games have you looking down the scope of a gun or behind the controls of a machine of war, but *This War Of Mine* focused on the civilian experience and depicted the cruel and merciless repercussions of war for the innocents caught in the crossfire. It's all depicted as a survival experience, as you must gather resources and craft to keep your band of survivors alive.



NIGHT IN THE WOODS

4 For a game that on the surface appears to be about a cat with big eyes hanging out with an alligator, bear and fox, *Night In The Woods* manages to be a moving depiction of a collapsing middle-American town, mental illness, depression and real human experiences like coming back to a childhood home and feeling disconnected. It's an amazing game.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING THE INDUSTRY?

WE POSED THE QUESTION TO OUR PANEL OF DEVELOPERS

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

With the games industry becoming larger, stronger, more influential and more diverse, it's crossing into the path of older forms of media, and that's going to cause frictions and opportunities moving forward. "Our industry is probably the most rapidly changing industry there has ever been," says David Braben. "Mobile phones are probably the next most rapidly changing. This rate of change is both disruptive, but also a very strong test of fitness in a Darwinian sense, meaning that the companies that can survive tend to be pretty tough to have done so. As the boundaries between the different entertainment sectors continue to blur further and further, we will see challenges from legacy media companies acquiring games companies, so this change will continue!"





WHERE NEXT FOR INDIES

Indie game makers have been enjoying a real boom in recent years, but when you look a little deeper, it's not been plain sailing. For every successful breakout indie release, there's probably dozens that got no attention at all. And a small production team doesn't mean small costs; making games remains an expensive proposition, even for a smaller studio. "The biggest challenge everyone is facing is how do you get noticed with all these releases?," says Jean-Francois Major. "Or how do you budget your game knowing the average game makes next to nothing?" The answer to these questions is difficult to determine easily. Hitching your star to a particular platform might get you some of the way, but discoverability can be a problem even for ID@Xbox titles, and especially for games on mobile or Steam. Content curation is something that still needs to be tackled.

TIME TO BE MORE CREATIVE WITH VR

As we've mentioned earlier, it still doesn't feel as if VR has found its killer app, and without really groundbreaking work in this area, the technology will remain a curiosity rather than an integral or even leading technology. "I do think we have been slow to properly embrace VR and other 'realities'," says Gary Bracey. "Pretty much all games have just used VR as an enhancement, rather than creating whole new experiences which truly take advantage of the immersive nature of the tech. There's someone out there who will identify a whole new type of game for VR and create the proverbial 'killer app' which will finally make people say 'I must get a VR rig because I want to play that game'. This hasn't happened yet, and until it does, mass-adoption will be slow."

> "FOR THOSE PEOPLE WHO AREN'T TECHNOLOGICALLY SAVVY, FINDING OUT ABOUT NEW GAMES THAT YOU MAY ENJOY CAN BE DIFFICULT"



MORE DIVERSITY AND MORE VOICES

It's often pointed out and commented upon that the games industry is still dominated, particularly in the upper ranks and most powerful positions, by white men, and that's something that needs to continue to change. "It sometimes feels like we're caught in a case of 'the snake eating its own tail' syndrome in that we would love to see more diversity in the ranks of our developers," says Jeff Kaplan. "We're doing a good job for the most part, and do enjoy a diverse group of developers. But it would be awesome to see that mixed up a bit more. Part of the problem is that we tend to make games for ourselves, so if we don't focus on diversity, we can reinforce the type of talent we attract. For example, I would love to see more games made by female visionaries in the hopes that – in turn – more females would be inspired by and excited to make games."



REACHING THE WIDER AUDIENCE

We also talked about the diversity of the audience and how that's about not just backgrounds, but what we mean by being a gamer in the first place, and the industry can do more to bring different demographics into the fold. "I'm most excited about platforms that make games more accessible to a wider audience," says Jodie Azhar. "People of all ages are playing games, with research by Nesta last year placing the average player age in the UK at 43, and women being more likely to play videogames than men, albeit less frequently. This clearly shows the interest is out there, but for those people who aren't technologically savvy, finding out about new games that you may enjoy can be difficult." Interestingly, this is where a streaming service model might really help. "I'd love to see something along the lines of a Netflix for games where people can easily access and try out different games without feeling they need to put up a huge upfront investment," Azhar continues. "This would hopefully also encourage the idea that games are for everyone, and there isn't a hard definition of what is or isn't a game."





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15 THINGS EIDOS MONTRÉAL IS BRINGING TO SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER

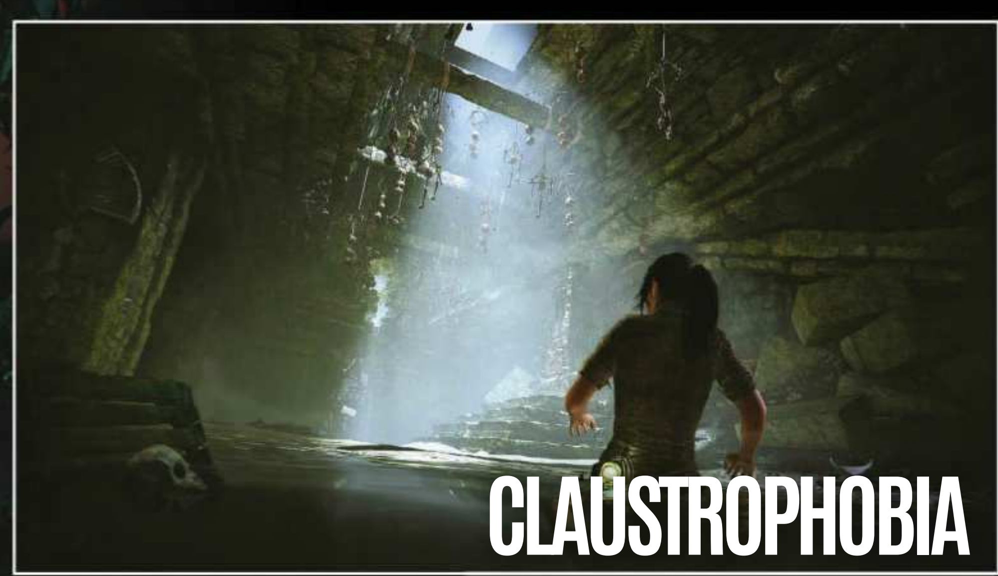
OUT OF CRYSTAL DYNAMICS' HANDS, YOU MIGHT THINK LARA'S LATEST ADVENTURE WOULD TAKE BOLD STEPS INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY. IT DOES… BUT ALSO DOESN'T

LONELY PLANET



01 With Lara's latest globetrotting adventure Eidos Montréal has gone all out in trying to represent the locales – and cultures – shown to players that bit more than just a thin stereotype. An early indication of this is Croft's trip through a Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration in Cozumel, Mexico – the environment is riddled with neat little touches and details that make it pop and bring the scene to life. It's gorgeous, and as close as many of us will get to witnessing the actual holiday, though there is always the worry of exotification and how that could impact how things are presented – though so far, the signs are all positive. And gorgeous. Did we mention gorgeous?

02 One way in which Eidos Montréal isn't changing the playbook is by introducing Lara – and therefore you – to many a situation where the walls, ceilings and gaps to squeeze through are all a little bit *too* close. Those of an anxious disposition may want to smack the pause button at semi-regular intervals should it become in any way overwhelming. It almost feels like a cheap trick now after we've been through so many of these tight gaps through which to squeeze since 2013's original reboot – but there's no denying the efficacy of putting the player under such panic-inducing pressure, causing so many of us to hurl expletives in the direction of the screen as we try furiously to free Lara from the underwater crag she's caught in.



CLAUSTROPHOBIA



MIRACLE-GRO

03 Once again we are met with a Lara Croft who is young, growing as a human and learning what it means to take on the mantle of the raider of tombs. She has changed since the earlier games, of course: a more confident and comfortable woman while on her adventures and in combat – certainly not a 'cornered animal' here – and it's been nice to see her develop into the character we were all introduced to back in the Nineties. Hopefully this will be it, though, as we're not sure how many more lessons Lara can learn about how, actually, it's okay to make mistakes sometimes. Something tells us *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* will take our heroine on a much darker path this time around, though.



TOMBS TO RAID

04 It wasn't really there in the 2013 game. It made a much bigger appearance in *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, but it's *Shadow* that's really doubling down on the tombs to raid for Lara. This time around we should – all things going accordingly – be spoiled for choice with the ancient ruins to scramble around, traps to avoid (aah, Mayan pointy sticks…), flooded chambers to try not to get lost and drown in and millennia-old puzzles to ponder over for half an hour each. The early parts of *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* show a mix of exploring ancient ruins and the modern series' combat leanings – we sincerely hope the game leans far more on the former than the latter.



STORYTIME

05 Lara Croft knows something the bad guys don't – where an ancient artefact is. She also knows something they do – where another, related artefact is. On using her considerable tomb raiding talents to, shockingly, raid a tomb, Lara relieves the ancient locale of its artefact and – according to the prophecies foretold – brings about Armageddon. As you do. Has she *actually* brought on the end of the world? That we don't know – nor would we throw spoilers so wildly here – but *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider*'s story will tell a tale of Lara grappling with wildly varying requirements and emotional battles as she tries to stop the big bads, not get lost in her own head, (potentially) save the world and try not to argue with long-time chum Jonah too much.



BAD BOYS

06 Lara is once again up against the forces of Trinity, the ancient organisation that has been snapping at her heels since day one of the modern trilogy. While they do try to shoot her in the face, Trinity's local bossman, known as Dominguez, does take time to chat with Lara about their motivations this time around. Pure-evil world domination? Well… yes, sort of. Blaming young Croft for setting in motion a good old-fashioned apocalypse, Trinity wishes to rebuild and remodel whatever is left over of the world into an image of its own creation. So, effectively, making an omelette on a global scale. What this translates to in game is another series of seemingly unlimited mercenaries to get into shootouts with.



TAKING SHOTS

07 With this being the third in a series, it's no surprise to see *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* returning to a style of combat we've seen from the previous games. In all honesty, very little has changed here – Lara still dips in and out of plentiful cover either with ease or too easily, depending on how you look at it, and it's still way more fun to pick people off with a bow and arrow than it should be. It's one area in which the new game won't be winning over any new fans, because really there's nothing particularly new to it, and if you've played any third-person action/shooter in the post-Gears Of War world, you know what to expect.



SHADOWY

08 While the out-and-out combat hasn't changed much at all, stealth has seen some tweaks and touches to make it both more fun and more rewarding to engage in. You've always been able to approach combat on the sly, picking people off quietly and hoping/planning not to be noticed as you go, but in *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* if you are noticed, you're now able to (if you're good enough) hide again afterwards. It's no longer a binary stealth/no stealth situation, which makes the stealth play that bit more appealing. Lara also has more options when it comes to hiding and striking from the shadows, blending into the bushes and undergrowth as though she's part plant, before emerging and… well, stabbing someone to death, frankly.



MECHANICAL (NON-)TWEAKS

09 Surrounding the adventure are the usual broader game elements we've again come to expect from Lara's latest travails – you'll be constantly smashing pots and looking out for shiny things to collect and examine as you amass XP to level up skills and equipment, collect scrap to manufacture new survival tools and shoot animals in the face to harvest what you need from them. Lara no longer cries when she shoots a deer, thus meaning she is either used to it now, or fully on the way to becoming the endangered species-murdering psychopath from the original Core Design series. Maybe that will be covered in the game at some point, or just bolted on as DLC later down the way. Either way the broader mechanics of *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* remain as unchanged and familiar as the combat is. That should mean we can jump into the action nice and fast and get on with all that tomb raiding we've been looking forward to.



OLD ROPE

10 Actually it's probably new rope – well, we hope it is, or Lara will be having a very bad time. One new skill she's learned this time around is how to rappel from certain situations, usually when utilising her climbing axes. It's a simple addition – and let's not go crazy here, it's one we've seen in plenty of other games – but a welcome one, adding the ability to lower from height, swing about and generally reach otherwise unreachable areas in a fun way. Is it something you'll develop as the game progresses? Probably not. No, this one is firmly in the realm of 'functional, realistic skill to add to someone's repertoire'. We just hope it really isn't old rope.

11 Would you believe it, *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* is a very good-looking game with some beautiful character models dominating cut scenes and genuinely atmospheric design in the environments surrounding said characters. With *Rise* proving one of the poster children for 4K gaming on console, it's no surprise Eidos Montréal would want to keep that momentum going – but there's real competition out there this time around, with everyone else wanting a piece of that… umm… 4K… pie. Basically, while none of it *actually* matters that much, the effort being put into *Shadow* graphically needs to be applauded, and it's sure to be one that captures a lot of imaginations on its release – especially with such detailed, atmospheric locales.



LOOKS



THE DARKNESS

12 The 'survivor' Tomb Raider games have all had an air of darkness throughout them – personal suffering, potential catastrophe, the loss of loved ones (and many others) – but it feels at first play like *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* might be looking to ramp that element up a fair bit. The personal suffering Lara goes through in the opening hours of the game is one thing, but what she – and you as the player – witnesses along the way takes things into a whole new world of dark. The hero's journey is a well-trodden path, but it looks like *Shadow* may well have stumbled off it and into a ditch somewhere, leaving Lara to make her own way through her own troubles and with her own demons.



QTES

13 Well what do you expect with a heading like that? *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* takes so very much from the previous two titles in the series and seemingly ignores the advances made by so many other games in the genre. It does indeed still stick with countless QTEs popping up to tell you to press a button to not die, or tap a button repeatedly to not die, or press something with the right timing to not die and so on. Is it unique? No. Is it particularly interesting? No. Is it very Tomb Raider? Absolutely. And maybe that's the point: in a world where everyone else has given up on 'press X to survive', Lara Croft hangs on to the dream (by pressing X quickly enough).



MUERTE

14 While Lara may experience the Day of the Dead one time, she can experience her own death countless times. Huzzah? Yes, it's that old chestnut – the thing where Crystal Dynamics accidentally made it a *thing* that Lara Croft has to be utterly brutalised whenever she dies, so Eidos Montréal has (as with many other elements) just picked up the mantle and carried it on. Plummeting, stabbing, shooting, oh-so-much impalement, drowning and more – you'd think we'd either be desensitised or bored of it by now, but really we're just uncomfortable in more ways than can be comfortably fit into this relatively small space. It does, in an odd way, make you want to keep Lara alive much more than you otherwise would – the alternative is frequently *horrible*.



CHARTS AND GODS

15 What *Shadow Of The Tomb Raider* is presenting in its early look isn't something anybody is going to be surprised with: there's a formula, it's being stuck to by the new dev team behind the game at Eidos Montréal and the end product will in all likelihood be good fun. But there's the question of what's happened in the meantime. *Tomb Raider* released in 2013. *Rise* in 2015. There's been a lot over those years – *The Last Of Us*, *Uncharted 4*, the sublime *God Of War* and other non-Sony titles too – and it's going to take a hell of an effort from Lara to make something that can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the absolute best of the genre. Can *Shadow*? Of course. Will *Shadow*? That's for us all to find out.

WHAT LIES BELOW

FIVE YEARS ON FROM ITS REVEAL, CAPYBARA GAMES FINALLY HAS A RELEASE WINDOW IN SIGHT FOR BELOW. JOIN US AS WE DIVE INTO THE DEPTHS OF DEVELOPMENT HELL WITH CREATIVE LEAD KRIS PIOTROWSKI AND ATTEMPT TO SHINE A LIGHT ON WHY THIS AMBITIOUS ADVENTURE HAS SPENT SO LONG CLINGING TO THE SHADOWS

Robbed of any context, the passage of time can seem somewhat inconsequential. Take *Below*, a game that has been in production for close to seven years. As a statement, one devoid of any real context, it's relatively hollow. And that, largely speaking, is because it works to mask a painful truth.

To all of us, *Below* may well have been on the periphery of conversation since the dawn of this console generation, though the truth is that time wasted waiting for a videogame is hardly any time spent at all. Games get delayed all of the time, our lives move on. There's always something new on the near horizon to arrest the attention; that's the nature of the untameable beast known as the videogame industry. For Kris Piotrowski, that horizon has been shrouded in uncertainty for some time. He cannot simply 'move on' because *Below* has become an inseparable part of who he has become.

The creative director of Capybara Games was 32 years old when he began prototyping *Below*, the game that was to follow 2011's subversive masterpiece *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* – scheduled to arrive as a launch title for the Xbox One. It was back then that he first began to envision it, a solemn adventure that cast a fragile hero in contention with the hidden forces of a daunting peninsula; concealed behind the mouth of a mountain was to be a cascade of catacombs suffocated by a darkness so dense that we would barely be able to conceive what lay hidden within them.

Piotrowski is 39 now. *Below* has been the focus of his creative energy for the better part of a decade. He's conflicted by the thought of it finally reaching the hands of players, torn between abject anticipation and a taunting trepidation. "On the one hand, I'm super relieved. I just can't wait to get this out of my system so that I can think about something else," he tells us, releasing a hearty chuckle that seems to instinctively dissipate into a deep, revealing exhale. "It does weigh heavily on you, when you work on something for this long; it can begin to play tricks with your brain. In a lot of ways, *Below* was a tough game for us to make, but there's this anticipation… this *expectation* that comes with this kind of development cycle; the players are expecting a great game. So, *yeah*," he tells us, blankly, "It's a little scary."

Not that any of this is necessarily a new feeling for Piotrowski. He may have been doing this job for most of his adult life, but that doesn't make the creative process any easier to bear. "It is scary to release any game at any point in time. *Sword & Sworcery* only took us a year and a half to make, but when it was coming out I was shitting my fucking pants. I didn't know if anybody was going to like it. I didn't know what to expect from it, and I remember losing my mind," he tells us, laughing. "I remember losing my mind when *Super Time Force* was coming out too. So for me, this is nothing new, there's just a couple of extra years worth of baggage on my shoulders for this one."



"But…" he pauses, pained, collecting his thoughts for a fleeting second before that infectious smile of his re-emerges. "I don't know, man. *Below* is the neatest little videogame that I've ever made. So I'm kind of excited too."

Caught between fear and excitement. We're certain that this wasn't a conscious creative decision on Piotrowski's part, but that war inside his head also happens to best describe the feelings that we experienced as we took our first steps into *Below*'s taunting labyrinth.

"We just set out to make this beautiful little roguelike; this solitary journey through the haunted depths of a forbidden isle," laughs Piotrowski as he reflects on Capy's original intentions for the project and of the development hell that was to follow. "You know, sometimes games are complicated beasts for a hundred different reasons. *Below* was one of *those* for us; it turns out that the game was very difficult to make."

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The development, we mean. *Below*'s protracted creative process may well have been more difficult than Capy had ever anticipated, but the game itself – its core vision and key pillars – remain relatively unmoved by time. Broadly speaking, *Below* is today as it was back in 2013: a procedural, persistent terrarium full of life, mystery and death. To explore its depths is to discover its secrets and in discovering its secrets you may just survive its dangers. It really is, as Piotrowski told us, this beautiful little roguelike.

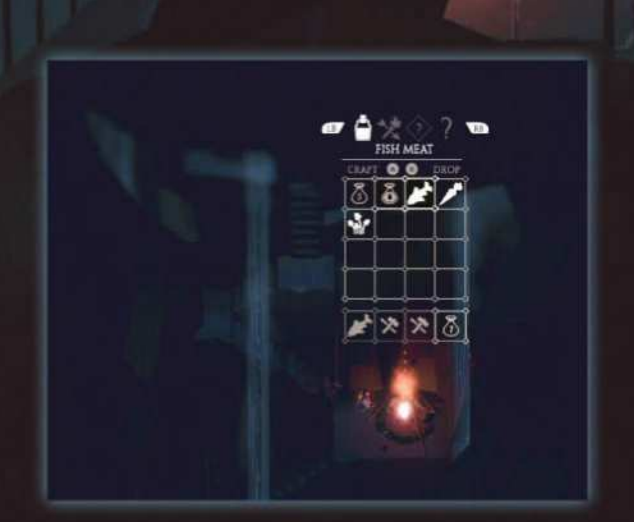
The thing is, *Below* may not have changed much over the years, but the environment around it certainly has. "At this point, it seems like every game is partially a roguelike," he admits, only too aware of how the landscape of the industry has shifted in the seven years. The genre has transformed from a forgotten relic of the Eighties – spearheaded by influential titles such as *Rogue*, *Angband* and *NetHack* – to something of a staple of the independent games scene. "I think a lot of [developers] were being influenced at that time by the baseline mechanics that were presented in those roguelike-type games," he says, noting a particularly memorable turning point. "*Spelunky* came along and revitalised the whole thing, and people got to see all of these mechanics find their way to different kinds of games."

The proliferation of the roguelike's starring mechanics throughout so many corners of the industry hasn't put Piotrowski off of *Below*, if anything it has only strengthened his resolve. He still believes Capy can shape the modern roguelike – the studio's unique spin on the form born from a unique approach to features that once helped define the genre.

The basic flavour of a roguelike is made up of a handful of key ingredients. The spectre of permanent death, procedurally generated environments, intuition-driven exploration and the procurement of mission critical items as you make slow progression towards an inevitable conclusion. Combined, it just *works*. The roguelike is an experience driven by absolute mechanical implementation, uninterested in superfluous elements of game design that have built up alongside the rapid advancements in technology that have helped shape the modern face of the industry. Whatever way you cut it, they are about as pure of a videogame experience as you are likely to find. It's as Piotrowski says, "There's something really nice about the setup for a roguelike. They have this beautiful replayability; the tension is a little bit higher than in regular games, because the stakes are usually raised when you're playing them."

It's the allure of permadeath – something he describes as being part of *Below*'s DNA from the very beginning – and procedural generation elements of the traditional roguelike that really piqued Piotrowski's interest. But will it be enough to set *Below* apart from *Spelunky*, *Nuclear Throne*, *The Binding Of Isaac*, and the hundreds of other roguelike-inspired games now available on the market? "The difference with our game is that the game world itself is persistent. The main idea behind *Below* is that you are playing a little, fragile character – this little fleeting life – but the island itself is sort of this big, ominous and mysterious space."

"Any little progress that you do end up making, the next character will be able to take advantage of





Your lone wanderer only has a limited number of options in combat. There's a light-blocking system, a sprint button, a jump attack and the ability to unleash short jabs of your sword, but that's about it.

> "SWORD & SWORCERY ONLY TOOK US A YEAR AND A HALF TO MAKE, BUT WHEN IT WAS COMING OUT I WAS SHITTING MY FUCKING PANTS"

it," he says, going on to detail the concept as we pique an eyebrow inquisitively. "If a player manages to run down a few levels and open a special door, for example, and they croak the moment they walk through it, then at the very least the next character will be able to take advantage of it. It means their path ahead is gonna be just a little bit easier."

"*Below* is full of other little ideas like that," Piotrowski continues, eager to explain elements of the game's design that it has kept secret for years. "You're not really able to build up your actual character, but the game world itself is something that you can make little bits of progress through and then eventually build upon."

Below is unequivocally a roguelike. It can be brutal and unforgiving, a challenge that seems to take pleasure in tripping you up when you least expect or desire it. Your tiny wanderer has but a limited pool of attack and defensive manoeuvres to draw from; you can poke at darting enemies with your sword, there's a jump attack and you can even block with your shield, should you get the timing down. But there's also more to it than that alone. When *Below* is all said and done, the studio wants to not only have delivered a powerful experience, but one that can tear down some of the walls that have been erected around the genre – it wants to make the roguelike less inaccessible – and, in spite of the game's inherently punishing nature, it's certainly on track to achieve that goal. "*Below* is a mixture of that kind of hardcore, permadeath concept from [classic] roguelikes with something that, to me, feels more like a classic adventure game," nods Piotrowski, who invokes The Legend Of Zelda series as a point of comparison. "You are unlocking things, taking down creatures, finding loot, and then making a subsequent life feel a little bit easier or a little bit more strategic."

In *Below*, you fight tooth and nail for incremental progression. Death will come quickly, but it doesn't necessarily signify the end of your journey – it's simply the beginning of another. Once a lone wanderer falls prey to the relentless monsters that roam the darkened caverns, or to the nasty traps that lay hidden in its shadows, another is soon sent in their place.

Why do adventurers keep venturing to this island – we pondered – when they are fully aware that they are heading to a place that no one has ever returned? On that note, Piotrowski is eager to keep his mouth shut – not that he can; he's too excited to talk openly about *Below* after years of self-imposed exile. "That's the question of the game," he smiles. "I mean, the website is called 'What Lies Below', right? I would have to reveal… okay, so, the game doesn't have a narrative in the traditional sense. It's not a game with cutscenes or dialogue; you're not gonna pick up little snippets of letters or audio logs or whatever. But there is still a narrative. There is something that the wanderers are there to do," Piotrowski teases, adding, "and there *is* a villain in the game. It… *waits below*," he says erupting into laughter. "Okay, it's Lovecraftian; I'll say it."

Every time you die you will respawn as a new randomly generated lone wanderer, arriving above ground some time later, run ashore by the violent ocean that protects the island. You'll become intimately familiar with the sights and sounds of that initial beach landing, the flickering light of a nearby bonfire and of the slow climb up an imposing mountain façade to begin retracing your steps back below. This is the loop at the heart of *Below*, though it is designed to shift and expand subtly over time. "That's how the player is able to initially enter into the game world. At first you do arrive on the beach every single time. But as you play the game you do find little

physical shortcuts from there deeper into the world. In fact, you can find a little shortcut right from that first little area…"

The shortcut he is referring to is one we stumbled upon by complete accident. Hidden, far from the open passageway that beckons every wanderer below to the first level of depth, was a locked door that resembled a monolith carved into the mountain. That, as we would later discover, could be prised open should you stumble upon a the correct cavern with the necessary tool in hand – in this instance we found it by moving through a hidden crawlspace near a small stream we were using to hunt for fish, though who knows where it might have been on a different run. "As you get deeper and deeper into the world, you're also constantly poking holes back up to the surface. Eventually, as you get further into the game, the surface of the island becomes this kind of multi-path hub… it means you'll still be able to get yourself back, and further in, to the world as long as you've unlocked those shortcuts. There's also another hidden actual travel mechanic in the game," he says, teasing, "but that's going into *secrets*." We've got some ideas about those, but that is to come later.

For now, we want to linger a little longer here on the beach, on this key aspect to *Below* that will, we're sure, ultimately ensure that it feels fresh and unique when it does finally land later this year. Capy has found a comfortable, combative neutral ground between persistent and procedural design. While the architecture of the surface area of the island will always remain the same, the subterranean levels are forever shifting.

As you venture deeper and deeper through *Below*'s twisting tunnels and caverns you'll have the opportunity to gather resources and open up shortcuts back up to the surface, though death will ultimately change the shape of the environment for your inevitable return – as if time itself has eroded away the spaces, warping them beyond immediate recognition. Walls and pools of water will shift and the shape of rock formations will have reshaped, but somewhere down there, inside and below, will be the rotting corpse of your predecessor, all of their items right there for the taking.

"There's a pretty big world down there. It is a combination of randomly generated dungeons, caves and other kinds of environments, mixed with an actual non-procedural element too," he continues. "*Below* has a much more realised adventure game-style world that's permeated with randomly generated passages." This is, in part at least, the reason for the lengthy development process. Capy's procedural generation system has had at least four full iterations over the seven years, with the studio's programmers constantly scrapping and reengineering how the system builds out the single-screen areas that make up the subterranean depths. It's been a labour of love, to say the least. "The core has never really changed; those core ideas that we landed on right at the beginning have been part of the project since day one, but we've been iterating on every single aspect of it. The game world, its structure – like the actual environments you pass through – is something that I've been refining and working on for a while," Piotrowski tells us, though he doesn't quite reveal the true extent of the struggle.

The designer was eager to ensure that some elements of *Below*'s geography never changed, no matter how many times you died. The core mechanics and systems that Capy identified so many years ago – the desire for it to be a minimalistic experience with little in the way of a UI, tutorials or explanation, for example – is all still present and accounted for. One thing that has changed, however, was the reliance on procedural generation to build out the entire world.

Capy wanted *Below*'s areas to resemble natural spaces, but the results of the system were too grid like and too predictable for Capy's liking. And so it set about bringing a personal touch to every one of the levels, excavating the shape of the game by hand as it went. "For the most part, it hasn't been about ripping something out and trying something completely different," Piotrowski admits. "A lot of it has just been trying to take every little piece of it and arrive at the most '*Below*-y' version of it, right? It just hasn't been, like, flip the tables and start over. It's been highly iterative; allowing us to focus on taking each individual thing and trying to drill into it as much as we can."

We'll say it if he won't, it sounds like it has been a hell of a lot of work. But it hasn't been in vein, because it has ensured that every space features visual touchstones to aid in navigation and exploration, a vital component to a game otherwise shrouded in death and mystery. Every level of depth that you enter into will be comprised of a procedurally generated passageway – a safe(ish) space where you can lament on your journey, craft precious items to aid in survival, and prepare for the next trial ahead – and then a larger main area that will blur the line between hand-crafted content and procedurally generated spaces. So while some elements may stay the same – the placement of a river, some recognisable chasms, that sort of stuff – the location of traps, the volume and ferocity of enemies, or any other number of dangers out there lurking in the shadows could (and probably will) change. You need to be on guard at all times.

How many layers deep does this gargantuan effort run? Piotrowski is keen to hold onto that information, but he would confirm that *Below* is "by far the biggest game that we've ever made." He will later estimate that the game could run for 20-plus hours, comparing

"THE LANTERN IS SORT OF OUR OCARINA OF TIME. THE GAME IS VERY MUCH BUILT AROUND THIS MAGICAL OBJECT AND THERE'S ONLY ONE IN THE WHOLE GAME"

■ *Below* was first revealed in 2013 though it has suffered numerous delays. In that time, the team has reworked its procedural generation system and overhauled the graphics. *Below* is now far darker and imposing, but it also looks stunning presented in 4K on Xbox One X.

UNDER PRESSURE

A look into the survival mechanics that will make this nightmare adventure just that little bit harder.

Capybara Games may be looking for ways to present an accessible roguelike to the world with *Below*, but that doesn't mean it won't still be filled with controller hurtling instances of savagery. The game offers little in the way of direction, hints, or tutorials; it's up to you to work out what you're doing and the most efficient way of doing it. You'll need to learn fast too, because it certainly isn't messing around.

Death will come fast and often in *Below*. Usually that'll arrive courtesy of the traps hidden in shadow, spiky death pits that'll kill you in an instant, or via the swarming monsters that are drawn to the power of the lantern. But of course, you'll also have far more human concerns to tend to as well – *Below* wouldn't be a roguelike if it didn't feature a handful of punishing survival mechanics.

"The health system is, basically, you have this heart, which is filled with blood. But tethered to that little heart is your hunger, your thirst, and temperature – you're always under the pressure of running out of food, running out of water, or freezing to death. They are the consequences of walking around in total darkness," *Below*'s lead designer Kris Piotrowski tells us.

As we were quick to discover, you'll stumble upon resources during your time in the caverns that can be used to top up these vital metrics. You can drink water from streams and even store it in bottles; you can pick up food which can be later used at the bonfires scattered between each level of depth to craft soups (the game's version of potions) or into edible treats to carry around in your small backpack for later.

The idea, says Piotrowski, is that you'll need to use the earlier levels to gather these mission critical items as the game only gets tougher the further down you venture. "The top part of the world is the most resource-heavy. As you get deeper and deeper into the world, the world becomes darker; the world becomes colder, and the resources become harder and harder to find. So those [survival] aspects come into play more and more so."

If worrying about water, food and warmth weren't enough, *Below* also happens to tie some pretty gnarly survival systems into its combat too. "A lot of enemies cause bleeding when they hit you. Some may cause a little bit, but some may cause critical bleed, which means basically you're gonna die unless you stop it. There's a bunch of different ways to deal with bleeding, you can craft bandages, you can create potions that can just boost your health, and you can get gear that can make you more defensive," Piotrowski continues. "You can also cauterize Rambo-style; quickly put your sword in some fire and then just cauterize the wound… those are just some of survival elements that you have to deal with, outside of just becoming a good player – like becoming good at combat, learning your way around the world, and understanding how crafting works."

The thrust of the game sees you venturing deeper and deeper below the surface of a mysterious island. Inside you'll find no end of trouble, as it's full of dangerous traps and ancient creatures all vying to keep you out.

it to Diablo in his stride. Though, ultimately, the length of the game will largely depend on how eager you are to explore, how expertly you make use of the various shortcuts, and how quickly you become acquainted with the fast travel systems put into place to aid progression and exploration. That is an element of the game that we are yet to cover.

Early on in your adventure you'll encounter something that doesn't quite fit with the naturalistic setting encountered above ground. Stumbled upon among the howling winds, the thundering rain and the lightning slicing through the night sky, a strange obelisk with a question mark hanging above it will reveal itself; as you approach it a blue glow will begin to emanate from the ground, circling it, taunting you closer. There's a lantern of some kind and, after tentatively picking it up, with it you are able to momentarily project a bright beam of light in front of you, controlled with twin-stick shooter degrees of precision. But the lantern isn't just used to project light on *Below*'s darkest corners, it is in fact the tool in which the entire adventure is pinned around.

"I knew you'd ask about that," laughs Piotrowski. "Okay, so the lantern is sort of our Ocarina of Time. The game is very much built around this magical object and there's only one in the whole game. So, if a character takes it down into the world and dies, it's like they dropped the little baton for the next character to come and pick up," he continues, before giving the smallest hint towards the wider story – something he swore he wouldn't do earlier in our conversation. "You're trying to get this lantern deeper and deeper into the game world."

It's funny. Despite being in development for seven years, there is just so much of *Below* that was never revealed to the public. The studio is eager to keep much of it a secret, in particular the larger creatures and more startling set pieces players can expect to encounter the further they push through the game. But there are some elements that we were able to get a taste of, largely by virtue of the fact that we have sharp eyes and inquisitive minds… okay, it's because we died so many times that we were able to pour over the finer detail of the first few levels, are you happy now?

"There is a currency system, yes," Piotrowski says, pausing, as we begin to question the little shining white crystals dropping from enemies as we hack, slash and desperately attempt to dodge through as many of the levels as we could in the span of an hour. "If you find

enough of the little gems, the little crystals, they power your little lantern in the game."

The light of this lantern can be used to open the doors that provide shortcuts back to the surface – one instance of which we detailed earlier – though it also has other more practical uses. It provides light in the darkest of areas, for one, giving you forewarning of any pitfalls or death-inducing traps, though (and perhaps more importantly) it also powers one of the two fast travel systems in the game.

While the amount of gems it costs to power the lantern is currently in flux (it costs 25 in the build we played, though Piotrowski notes that it may be reduced to 10 ahead of launch), essentially you use gems to imbue the lantern with a magical energy that can then be thrown into an open fire, turning it blue and creating an opportunity for fast travel in your most desperate hour of need. "If you've created a blue fire then, from any other fire [in the game], you can teleport back to that one. So as you go through the game world you're kind of setting these new checkpoints for yourself. However, they're not permanent. You can only use them once – it's essentially your one shot to get back to your corpse."

It's little elements like this that demonstrate Capy's commitment to making the roguelike more accessible. Piotrowski tells us that the ideal run for *Below* would see you moving down a level, setting the bonfire blue in an open passageway before then attempting to push on, clearing the room of its threats and desperately searching for 25 more crystals to reset the cycle. If you die in pursuit of them, you are given a single do-over – leaping back to your position from that bonfire on the beach. Fail that time too and, well, you'll have a lot of running to do to get back to the all-important lantern. "Your corpse drops with the lantern and all of its inventory, whether you found gear, or weapons, or created tools or stuff like that. Then you could, right from the beach, teleport back there and you have one shot to get back to that corpse. If you fail at that point, then you go back to the beach as a new character, and the bonfires are just reset."

In truth, *Below* isn't the game we had expected it to be. It's so much more. Capy has created a haunting and unsettling environment for us to traverse, imbuing it with some truly wonderful mechanics to encourage players to spend more time within its claustrophobic caverns. It's a taunting nightmare, a challenge that won't easily be conquered, but it doesn't feel unfair – quite the opposite, it feels perfectly measured. We can hardly believe it, but after seven years the wait for *Below* is almost over, and we couldn't be more excited to spend more time uncovering its mysteries.

Kris Piotrowski can hardly believe that this journey has almost come to an end either. Despite consuming seven years of his life, he's

Below is a roguelike that draws heavily on classic action-adventure games like The Legend Of Zelda. It's certainly a challenge, but it's also fused with plenty of ideas to help make your difficult journey a little more manageable.





> "I JUST CAN'T WAIT TO GET THIS OUT OF MY SYSTEM SO THAT I CAN THINK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE"

happy with the way the community has stuck with Capybara and *Below*. It is, in fact, a part of what has kept them going strong through its darkest of hours. "I've had my head down so much working on the game, because I'm generally overly-stressed about how people are perceiving *Below*, how long it's taking and all that stuff," he tells us as we question whether it's difficult to remain motivated on production. "I'm sort of always feeling the flames underneath me. But I will say that, yeah, from our perspective, the community that we have around Capy has been very supportive and very positive. All of a sudden any time I get a chance to talk to press about it, I'm surprised to see it has maintained this intrigue and mystery."

"It's got this little thing to it…" he says, getting lost in his own head. 'Like an aura?' we suggest. "Yeah, exactly, and it's kind of just been there from the beginning; it hasn't gone away for one reason or another. I'm sort of pleasantly surprised about that… it's had this kind of longevity. We've always talked about *Below* as something that was important to the studio – something that we want to get right – and I think people just have put a little bit of faith in our work and given us the time to let it become what it is. That makes me very happy.

So what's next for Kris Piotrowski? He won't commit to setting a release date in stone – that one has burnt him one too many times over the years. But the end is certainly in sight, *Below* will be with us by the end of 2018, though there is still work to be completed. "I will say that I'm not done yet. But this year has felt like we're moving towards it, towards release. I'm working on the final cut scenes; it's all in front of me now."

"It's a little terrifying but, yeah, hopefully it will be cathartic… I'm definitely looking forward to thinking about something different," he tells us, adding with a smile: "Like *Below 2*…" erupting into laughter as he says it, waving his hands out in front of him: "no, no! I'm joking, I'm good."

DELAYED GRATIFICATION

Capybara Games' creative director and Below's lead designer KRIS PIOTROWSKI gives us some insight into why Below has spent so long in development

BELOW WAS ANNOUNCED BACK AT E3 2013.
Yikes! Yeah…

IT'S NOW 2018.
I know, I know!

SO, OKAY… WHERE TO EVEN BEGIN. WHAT HAPPENED?
Well, we made a classic mistake, which I guess everybody has to do once before they really learn it. Back in 2013 we had parts of the game in place – core elements of its design and the art style – and we were super excited about what we had. Microsoft asked us if we wanted to show it at this giant event. We were just like, 'Fuck yeah! There's no way this could go wrong!'

FUNNY HOW THESE THINGS WORK OUT, EH?
Yeah. So, we did it; We got our demo together, we put together our trailer, showed it at this big event, and then went home and it was like, 'Right, time to make the game. This will be a piece of cake'. It turns out that the game was very difficult to make.

WITH HINDSIGHT, DO YOU THINK THERE'S ANYTHING YOU COULD HAVE DONE TO SMOOTH OUT THAT PROCESS?
It's a classic case of announcing your game too early. I think we could have easily just kept *Below* to ourselves for at least a couple of years and then announced it. And, in hindsight, that's what we would've done. But you can't put the toothpaste back in the tube once it's out. [laughs]

AFTER MISSING A FEW MILESTONES AND RELEASE WINDOWS, CAPY PUT BELOW ON INDEFINITE HIATUS. WHAT WAS THE THINKING THERE?
We basically kind of came to this decision that trying to sustain any sort of external hype for an amount of time that was indefinite or unknown to us… to me that felt like a bad move. Basically, the first thing I did was a horrible mistake, and then as it kept going I made the decision to just pump the brakes, pull it out of the spotlight, and just tell people, 'Listen, you're not gonna hear about this at all until we feel a lot more confident with where it's at.' That's sort of how it went.

HOW BIG IS THE TEAM WORKING ON BELOW?
It's 11. 11 or 12? Yeah, so Capy as a whole is 25 right now. And we tend to work on two projects at once. So while we're making this game, we made *Super Time Force*, we made *Don't Starve: Shipwrecked*, and we just recently released *OK, K.O.! Let's Play Heroes*, and now that team is working on a couple of new prototypes, and my team is still working on *Below*. But that's the size of it. It's not a huge team, it's not a small team… it's probably the biggest team that we've had, but it's still not massive. It's like, five artists, five programmers, and auxiliary people around that.

WAS CANCELLING BELOW EVER A CONSIDERATION?
No, throughout this whole thing we've never talked about that being a possibility. We've always, from the beginning, treated it as a project that we wanted to release when it was done. We've never really had an opportunity, as a studio, to do that before. But this time around we were actually in that position, and I felt like we had something kind of unique and interesting on our hands. The whole studio got behind the idea of holding it back until it was done.

DO YOU STILL BELIEVE IT WAS THE RIGHT DECISION?
Obviously it could be seen as a negative decision… but from my perspective, a lot of my favourite studios swear by releasing when it's done. So, I don't know. I kind of look at it that way; It's like, 'Well, everything I love kind of went that way at some point.' Somebody had to, at some point, say 'No. This is not coming out until *it's done*.' It happens. Hopefully *Below* is one of those games that comes out and makes a splash after a long development."



IN CONVERSATION WITH

RHIANNA PRATCHETT

GAMES™ SPEAKS WITH ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED VIDEOGAME WRITERS IN THE WORLD TO GET A SENSE OF HOW THE INDUSTRY CAN BETTER SUPPORT STORYTELLERS AND WORLD BUILDERS

"We're still working out the best way to tell story in games," reflects Rhianna Pratchett in a delightfully sprawling conversation, conducted from the relative comfort of our respective offices. "That's because there is no one *best* way to do it and that's what we're all slowly learning. I've seen the evolution of that attitude – and the role of the writer – in this industry and it has been really marvellous to see."

It has indeed been marvellous to see. Although Rhianna Pratchett knows better than most that we still have a long way to go. After close to two decades working in service of interactive entertainment – writing stories both for and about videogames – Pratchett has been in the enviable position of not only witnessing the attitude towards storytelling in gaming shift but of directly influencing its growth and maturity too.

Pratchett started her career as a journalist, a specialist in dissecting real-time strategy and role-playing games. She wrote the Overlord series, is responsible for penning *Heavenly Sword* and gave Faith a believable world to navigate in *Mirror's Edge*. Her influence can be seen in *Stronghold Legends*, *Risen* and *Viking: Battle For Asgard*; her contribution found buried behind the polygons in *BioShock Infinite*, *Prince Of Persia* and *Thief*. But of course the work she's perhaps most famous for is in reshaping the destiny of Lara Croft, serving as lead writer on Crystal Dynamic's *Tomb Raider* and its sequel, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*.

There's a reason Pratchett is one of the most revered and discussed writers of videogames in the world. Adept at world building and characterisation, a vocal supporter of improving the position of writers embedded in the industry, and keen to improve the variety and diversity of stories being told in videogames – there was no better person for us to speak with as we look towards the future of storytelling in the industry. And yet, despite of all of her success, it turns out that she had never planned on becoming a writer. But then again, so few ever do.

From your perspective, how do you think the role of games writers and narrative designers has evolved since you first became involved in the industry?
I think it's been really interesting to be in this position over the last 18 years, because I have genuinely seen an evolution in the industry. I feel like I got into the industry at such a pivotal moment; now I can look back over my career and see that I was there for when it was changing. It's like I was in the Wild West and the railroads are starting to come in. It does kind of feel like that, like in the early days it was just a few lonesome cowboys and then the tracks came down and industrialisation happened.

Broadly speaking, what have been some of the biggest changes in that time?
There weren't really 'game writers' when I started out and the title 'narrative designer' was only just starting to be used – I think Mary DeMarle over at Ubisoft, who is now at Eidos Montreal, was one of the first to start using that phrase.

People didn't really talk too much about story or characters much either… and there were certainly no awards for game writing. But over time, slowly, things started to change; the press, the gamers, publishers and developers started to take games more seriously.

Speaking of the press, you actually started your career as a journalist in the early Noughties; do you remember getting much access to writers when you were covering the industry?
I never met any game writers the entire time I was at *PC Zone*. I think I met people that did *some* of the writing but they were never a writer first, nobody ever said, "And here we have the writer". It just wasn't really part of the industry.

It wasn't that the writers were being hidden away – although there was possibly a little bit of that to it – but it was more that game writing as a career didn't really exist at the time. There were people doing it, but they were usually the designers or the producers, or literally anyone who had the time and the inclination to do it. It was basically the only field of game development that wasn't done by a professional skilled in that field… which is kind of madness, really.

When did you decide that you wanted to pursue game writing as a career?
I didn't really set out to be a game writer because I never really knew what I *was* until I was being it.

Rhianna Pratchett started off her career as a freelance journalist before later working for the famous *PC Zone* magazine. It would only be a few years before she found herself working with Larian Studios on *Beyond Divinity*.

“GOOD STORYTELLING IS IMPORTANT IN EVERY OTHER ENTERTAINMENT MEDIUM SO THERE'S NO REASON WHY IT SHOULDN'T BE EQUALLY AS IMPORTANT IN GAMES”

Okay then, let's take a bit of a step back. How did your path into the videogame industry begin?
It seems so long ago now… but like so many things that *seem* so long ago, it also feels like it happened yesterday. I actually got my first ever gig writing about games for *Minx*, a women's magazine aimed at 18 to 24 year olds, thanks to a kick-ass journalist called Kate Spicer. I'll always be grateful to her for giving me a chance.

Why were you drawn to writing for *Minx*?
Minx was a little bit more rock 'n' roll, a little bit edgier than the women's magazines at the time. I quite liked it. I reviewed bits and pieces for them, like Neil Gaiman's Sandman graphic novels, and, eventually, they decided to let me cover games. That lasted for about three issues before the magazine redesigned and became like all of the other women's magazines at the time – all about *lipstick and boys*. It really lost its edge. But it was really unprecedented then – and now, to be honest – for a magazine like that to cover games. It's such a random start in the industry, really.

From BAFTA nominations to being awarded for Outstanding Achievement in Video Game Writing by the Writers Guild Of America, Pratchett was also awarded an Honorary Fellowship from her old university stomping ground, the London College Of Communication.



Had you always wanted to become a games journalist?
Well, my father always said that he could see the scaly hands of journalism reaching out from me. But I did journalism because I didn't know what to do in my life and it seemed like quite a good way of passing the time until I worked it all out. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I kind of found my way just going, 'Oh, this seems like an interesting thing to do at the time'. It also paid the bills.

While you're now known for writing some of the biggest action games in the world, what were your favourite games to cover during your time *PC Gear* and, of course, *PC Zone* magazine?
I was very much into strategy games. I think everyone associates my time at *Zone* with role-playing games, but it's actually strategy games that were one of my first loves. There was a little bit more competition at *Zone* for RTS work. I saw less competition for the RPG games and I don't know whether that's because they thought that it was a suitable genre for a lady… there was no way I was going to get near a first-person shooter. I did enjoy them, but there was always stiff competition for the first-person shooters.

Do you have any fond memories of working as a games journalist?
I remember my first industry event. I was sitting on a very old rickety coach with lots of other games journalists, dressed head-to-toe in white flame retardant suits – with the hoods and everything – that made us look like we were in the sperm scene from Woody Allen's *Everything You've Always Wanted To Know About Sex* (*But Were too Afraid To Ask)*. I think the anticipation of what was going to happen far outweighed what actually *did* happen… someone set something on fire quite a long way away from us. That was the press trip for *Shadow Man*.

Aha, sounds about right! So, how did you make the leap from writing about videogames, from covering ridiculous press events, to actually writing content for them?
I was only at *Zone* (full-time) for about two years but I had great fun. I went all around the world, meeting developers and seeing how games are put together. I decided to go freelance and soon after I got my first games writing gig as a story editor on Larian Studios' *Beyond Divinity*.

That career change in 2003, was it something that you had sought out?
It was completely out the blue! I was a big *Divine Divinity* fan and the developers remembered me. I think I was the biggest fan within the UK press; if I love something, if I *really love it*, then I would gush about it. The rest of the UK was kind of "hmmm" about it and I was much more in line with the Americans… but, you know, it's *Larian Studios*. They are still going and still going great; I knew it back then, I could see the spark of genius.

What was your biggest contribution to the wider *Divinity* lore?
I did a lot of editorial work on *Beyond Divinity*; I was helping to polish up the script that was written by [Frederik De Caster]. I also did a little bit of provisional content creation… I wrote a little tie-in novel, this little novella. I can't really remember much about it and it probably wasn't very good…

Come on, it was probably excellent…
Well, I wrote it very quickly and I had no editor! It was just a fun thing to do, though I now hear from the Larian writers that it's all encased in *Divinity* lore. I think they are all made to read everything now and it's just like, 'Oh my god, I'm so sorry!'

Looking back to this period of your illustrious career, how was the role of a writer perceived within the industry at a studio level during the time?
It used to be very much an afterthought: 'well, anyone can do the writing so we'll just put in some word bits further down the line'. Compared to all of the other positions on the team, there can be an unspoken – or sometimes loudly spoken – view that anyone could do it. Anyone can write words therefore anyone can write a story – people have seen movies and they read books so obviously they can write stories.

So you're constantly fighting against that kind of perception?
There's a lot of… sometimes there's lack of respect for what writers do. Sometimes it's like [studio execs] are saying, 'Well, anyone can do it but you've just decided to give yourself a fancy title of writer.' You're fighting against that. You're fighting against the fallout from the fact that professional writers weren't used all that much; fighting against the perception that they are going to destroy the gameplay with their words.

How do you even begin to fight back against such outdated thinking?



Working on *Overlord* is one of Pratchett's fondest experiences in the industry, crediting not only the fun she had working on the project, but the smaller development team and collaborative working environment too.

LOST WORDS

RHIANNA PRATCHETT DETAILS HER UPCOMING PROJECT

Rhianna Pratchett has, for a spell, stepped away from triple-A videogame production. After wrapping *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, she has started lending her talent to film and TV – though that isn't to say that she has left gaming behind entirely. In fact, Pratchett is currently working on an independent production entitled *Lost Words*. It looks to be a match made in heaven.

"*Lost Words* takes place in the journal of a young girl. It's partly about what's going on in her real world; she's kind of creating this fantasy world to help process what she's going through, and you access that fantasy world by basically climbing through the pages of her journal," Pratchett tells us, who notes that the small team at Sketchbook Games has been working with the Wellcome Trust to ensure that it gets the details right. "That fantasy world is sort of shaped by the emotions that she's going through."

It's a game all about words. They form the basis of the platforms that you need to navigate, they help solve puzzles and they can even take form in the fantasy world around you. It's a beautiful game, smart in its use of narrative form and traditional game structure – though that isn't to say that development has necessarily been easy. "It's been a lot harder than any of us imagined," admits Pratchett. "Because narrative is so twinned with gameplay, trying to make the narrative sound natural and as if it has come from a journal of a young woman, while also being functional in terms of what's needed for gameplay, has been one of the biggest challenges."

Lost Words has been quietly in development for a number of years now and has an all-star team behind it. The results are pretty startling and, while it doesn't have a firm release date just yet, we've been assured that it's on the near horizon.



Rhianna Pratchett has been a powerful presence in the games industry for close to two decades. Her impact is felt outside of the games themselves, a voice of reason in the fight to give writers more respect in an evolving industry.

[Studios] have got to get professional writers in and fit them into their teams, and identify who it is they are going to need to speak to within them; making sure that they have all the right information at the right time and the right people to work with. You know, are they going to be in-house or are they going to freelance? If they are freelance, when do you need to get them into the studio? The industry is *still* working this out as it goes along.

How late into a triple-A production can writers actually be introduced, even when it's in an experience that is seen as predominantly story-driven?
It can be very late. It sort of largely depends on how much has been nailed down in the production schedule. I coined the term 'narrative paramedic' many, many years ago to describe the ways in which writers were used in games. It was just *a little* bit of gentle knocking the industry.

Writers are often brought on at the end of a project when the story is dying, usually because no one has given it any love and attention. Then they're basically told to try and salvage the story in any way they can. They will usually have some very strict barriers and conditions on how they can do that and what they can change.

You know that we can't let you off the line without at least one horror story…
I've been asked to do projects – and I've had colleagues asked to do projects – where they basically have to… okay, so, all the cutscenes have already been recorded so you can only write dialogue that is of the exact same length as the previous dialogue…

That's such a ridiculous request.
…or being asked to turn around a hundred-thousand words in two weeks; it can be really crazy stuff. It came from this lack of respect for narrative and storytelling, and the mistaken view that it wasn't important to players. Maybe it isn't important to some of them, but good storytelling is important in every other entertainment medium so there's no reason why it shouldn't be equally as important in games.

You served as writer and co-story designer on *Mirror's Edge*, a game with a notoriously fractured relationship between its gameplay and its narrative. What was it like working on the title?
Mirror's Edge is probably my biggest example of a narrative paramedic job. I was on that for maybe a year. That seems like a long time but when you look at big games – especially at a new IP – they are usually in development for three to four years and, within that time, the whole game had been designed with no narrative in mind.

So how much had been established before you were brought in?
So they had designed the look [of Faith], her face, the look of The City and the way she moved within it – all without anyone thinking too seriously of *'why'*. Why she looked like this, why she moved like this, why the city looked



like this. They had just gone 'This seems cool' and went and did it. Then I had to come in and basically stitch a narrative around it, pulling everything together and answer all of these 'why' questions.

It sounds like a nightmare, but it must be something of an interesting creative challenge too, right?
It's a pretty intensive creative exercise. To take a bunch of assets, gameplay, movement and visuals and then mould them into a story, but it isn't ideal. Ideally you want to be able to develop the story alongside the level design and mechanics so it all folds together nicely.

Would we be correct in assuming that your days as a narrative paramedic are behind you now?
I try to avoid taking on those kinds of projects now. It can be a bit soul-destroying, because you always see all the things that you could've done if only [a studio] had talked to you a year or two years previously. But those kind of gigs are still out there and probably will still be out there for a long time.

Is that because studios are still yet to fully understand how they can best utilise writing professionals?
It is really great to see the industry taking narrative more seriously now but I think we've still got quite a long way to go. I think getting professional writers involved at the right time is still a little bit of a learning process. I wouldn't say it's industry wide at the moment. There's lots of teething problems associated with the fact that this is a relatively new position on teams.

But writers definitely do need to be engaged earlier on in the process, as do other narrative professionals like narrative designers, cinematic directors and storyboard artists. There are a lot of things that writers can contribute to a project – there are a lot of invisible work that's actually helping pull everything together.

> "STORYTELLING IS TOO IMPORTANT TO JUST BE LEFT TO THE WRITERS"

Do you think that the presence of professional writing teams is still very much under-valued?
People always talk about writing being kind of cheap and easy. And it kind of is in comparison to the other parts of the game that can be much more labour and budget-intensive, but the story is the glue that holds all the expensive parts together. It needs as much love, care and attention as all of the much more admittedly expensive parts because it gives those expensive parts context and meaning. It makes players *care* about those expensive parts – not just understand them, but *care* about the game, the world and its characters, it makes them keep wanting to play onwards.

How important is it that the industry change its attitude here?
It's important, but then that was always important to me. But I think, over the last decade and a half, we've seen how important it is to players too. That's then opened it up so that developers and publishers are taking it seriously as well. We're seeing great new ways of telling stories, and we've seen that emerge through studios like Telltale and Dontnod with *Life Is Strange*.

Telltale and Dontnod tend to avoid using traditional cutscenes, do you think players are starting to turn away from that type of story delivery system?
A lot of people dislike cutscenes, but there's also lot of people that love them; they love them when they are well paced and well placed in the game – cutscenes that aren't showing you lots of cool stuff that you can't do as a player. Players want something that's well written and engages them in the story and the world. I think there are many great ways to tell stories in games.

We've seen narrative-driven adventures and games that lean on environmental storytelling become more prevalent in this industry over the last decade thanks, in part, to the impact of BioShock. Is this an area you are interested in exploring?
I am interested in environmental storytelling; the first *BioShock* was a real masterclass in environmental storytelling. Every entertainment medium uses environmental

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

RHIANNA PRATCHETT TELLS US WHY IMPROVING DIVERSITY ISN'T JUST GOOD FOR THE HEALTH OF THE INDUSTRY BUT FOR THE EVOLUTION OF STORYTELLING IN GAMING TOO

"It feels like our audience is much more diverse than we are. We're still sort of struggling to catch up a little bit. There's still a lot we can do," Pratchett tells us as we discuss the areas that desperately need improving across the industry. "I think the conversation about diversity, for so long now, has just focused around women but there's so much more to it than that. It is about different ethnicities, age groups, ability, sexual orientation and backgrounds too – all the ways that human beings are amazing and diverse. That is what we should be representing, not just the same white guy over and over and over again. That's slowly getting through. It was great, for example, to see *Watch Dogs 2* and *Mafia III* coming out [in 2016] with a black male protagonist. That was pretty unprecedented, to have that in one year. But we're still not nearly as diverse as, say, TV, which I think is probably the pinnacle of diversity in storytelling at the moment.

"TV is really overtaking film now. Because of platforms like Netflix, we're getting a lot more diversity in storytelling, which has really opened up the audiences a lot. But it does just feel like there's so much more that we can do. We are a medium that is all about putting yourself in the shoes of another person. There's so much powerful storytelling within that which we aren't quite finding the best way to utilise yet. It's such a unique element that games have over every other entertainment medium – the fact that you are the story. You're not passively absorbing it; it's happening around you *because* of you, and you're often stepping into the shoes of another character in another life. We need to push the boundaries of who that character is and what the shape of that life is."

storytelling, but the real estate for it in games is huge. Because you can walk around in the world for as long as you want, poke yourself into every single corner and look at every single thing, it means that there's so much we can do with the environment. But it means sort of thinking beyond the script, beyond words, and involving artists and level designers in the storytelling as well.

This comes back to your point of needing to integrate writing professionals earlier into the development process?

That's really the way the industry needs to go to become more grown-up and proficient in storytelling, in that we all have to become better storytellers. Storytelling is too important to just be left to the writers. The artists, the designers, the animators, the composers, they all should be brought together to kind of support the narrative and support the world; in a way that doesn't hobble the gameplay in favour of the story but where they're both kind of supporting each other, and all the different development teams are kind of on board and supporting the story through their particular art.

We do wonder whether some studios have learned the wrong lessons from the popularisation of environmental storytelling. Have diary pages and audio logs become a narrative crutch?

I think it can be. Obviously *BioShock* popularised the audio diary, but it also did them very well as well. If you have a feature – even if it's been repeated a lot – I think the players can forgive a lot so long as it's done well... But, you know, the fact that we can tell amazing stories without any dialogue whatsoever means that yes, they are becoming a little bit of a crutch.

I still think there's a place for it if it is done well, but I also think there's more original ways we can be doing it – but they involve writers and narrative designers being there at the start to kind of work it out together. The more you involve writers and narrative designers at the start of the project, the more options that are going to be open – bringing them on board at the start will help a team come up with interesting mechanics of how to tell the story. If they are left to the last few months or a year, their options of how they can tell a story are going to be severely limited.

How did it feel to see that your work on the *Tomb Raider* reboot was the basis of the film earlier this year?

I've actually not seen the movie yet but I'm sure I will! I don't know whether it was a condition of the movie that it *had* to use the game story... I'm only speculating, I don't really know. The game had been fairly popular so I don't see why they would have changed it; I think it was actually quite an original location and mythology for a game. It seems like it takes a lot of influence from *Tomb Raider*, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* and a little bit from the comics as well.

I am a bit sad that they went in so heavily with the father story, because it was never my number one love in *Rise* and it was never my number one love in the [original] movies either. I think the original *Tomb Raider* movies kind of went heavy on the father aspect of Lara's character and that seemed to be something that the [new] film had picked up on as well. It's really tried and tested and I think that focus on the father aspect irritated some of the fans. Then again, it's got a 49 per cent Rotten Tomatoes score... for a videogame movie, that's practically Oscar-winning.

It's funny you should say that, because in the last six years we've seen a real influx of videogame stories with a basis in fatherhood while motherhood continues to be so poorly represented, why do you think this is?

I think it's because this generation of game developers are becoming dads. For example, Cory Barlog [creative director, Sony Santa Monica] talks a lot about his experiences as a father and how that influenced him on *God of War*. I think a lot of developers are becoming fathers and musing on fatherhood, but there aren't so many female developers becoming mums who are also in game director or creative director positions.

So I think a lot of it just comes from this generation of male developers becoming fathers. They are folding that life experience into their games and some of them are working with a male protagonist who has been allowed to grow older and is now in an obvious life position for them to become a dad.

Do you think this is likely to be a problem?

I don't have a *huge* problem with it myself, but it is becoming very prevalent. The mums are *always* lost or dead, or missing or are never around. It's like you can only be a good father if you don't actually have a mother around.

There's been very little exploration of motherhood in games. I thought *BioShock 2* was pretty interesting in that regard. [Dr. Bridgette Tenenbaum] is a terrible, horrible mother, but [2K Marin] did explore that aspect and relationship, which I thought was very interesting. It's kind of predictable that, as the male developers grow up and have families, that it's gonna be reflected in their games. It's nice that they're bringing in stuff from their real world; actually considering the themes that they're putting into their games, how they are exploring character relationships and giving their games more meaning.

Yeah of course, because it's important for writers to draw on their real-life





Pratchett believes that *Tomb Raider* had more heart, but believes that its sequel, *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, was a more polished narrative experience. She puts this down to a rigorous process of feedback and refinement between the expanded narrative team.

experiences and relationships to help establish more believable stories, characters and interactions.
I certainly drew on my relationship with my father to help depict Lara's relationship with her father, particularly in some of the letters that he wrote to her. So, in *Rise* there's a whole series of letters that you can get – they are Richard Croft's letters to Lara when she's a kid – and he talks about the night that she was born. That's actually a riff on the night that I was born and what my dad told me about that night. He said that when he was interviewed, when he had Alzheimer's, that it was one memory he said he didn't want to lose. So I thought, 'I'm gonna immortalise that in *Rise of Tomb Raider*'.

That's such a lovely touch.
It was just a way for me to bring something more personal and meaningful into an aspect of the plot that I hadn't previously been much of a fan of. And it allowed me to get a bit more at peace with it, really, which you kind of need to as a working writer. You've gotta find a way to just get on with it and do the work.

We are starting to see more game stories that are focused around very human themes, driven by vulnerable and fallible characters, rather than the traditional power fantasies. Do you think that this change is important for the future and growth of the industry?
Yeah, I do. I think a lot of that is coming out of the indie community. Right now, in the indie community in particular, there's a lot of focus on themes like loss. I guess that's also coming out as we evolve as developers and we start losing people around us. You can kind of see the evolution of life as a human being played out across the development of the last twenty years. We grow up, we have power fantasies, we have families, and then we go away. You can see that being reflected across games through triple-A and indie games. I like a good first person shooter, but we do need more verbs with how we engage in the world in games. We are very reliant on violent gameplay and, to be clear, that is not me criticising it, it's just, I think we have become too reliant.

It must be a challenge to merge considered storytelling, as well as more human stories, within worlds that are defined by their violence.
It is very difficult – and I speak from experience – to tell stories against a very violent backdrop. It's not impossible, but it does narrow the things you can tell when a lot of the time your main character will engage in very brutal, very violent gameplay. It's challenging, definitely, and I think we have such a rich and diverse audience out there that I think it's essential for us to keep pushing the envelope as developers and finding new ways to express ourselves – to find new ways for players to express themselves through gameplay and mechanics. I think we've always been quite a risk-averse industry; it usually takes someone to go first and do it (and do it well) and then suddenly people start taking notice and things start changing slowly.

I really like the way that indie games in the last half-decade or so have exploded. The personal stories that they're being used to tell is, I think, remarkable. I think it's more difficult when you're up at a triple-A level and you're dealing with millions and millions of pounds and with shareholders. It can be a lot harder, but it's not impossible – it often takes writers having high-level positions on a team.

That's something that we have already seen reflected in game studios such as Naughty Dog and Irrational Games, with writers having a much bigger input in the process from the earliest part of the project, right?
It's no surprise that games like *The Last of Us*, BioShock and Uncharted came from teams that had writers as creative directors and as game directors – teams that produced more story and character-focused worlds. So I think when more experienced writers get those kind of positions then we will be seeing more Uncharted-style games, more BioShocks and more emotional and more pertinent storytelling – games that have something to say about the world and about what it means to be human.

Do you think we've still got a long way to go in that respect?
We've got to keep pushing the envelope. It sort of seems funny when you talk about it… Oh yeah, all of these games are exploring what it means to be a dad now. And it's like, how far are we behind everyone else? *Everyone else.* We're just exploring fatherhood at the moment and, oh yeah, recently we managed to do two women on screen at the same time as friends. It just feels like we're lagging behind other entertainment mediums so much. *But* we have closed the gap from where we were a decade ago, so that's something. I think we are heading in the right direction.

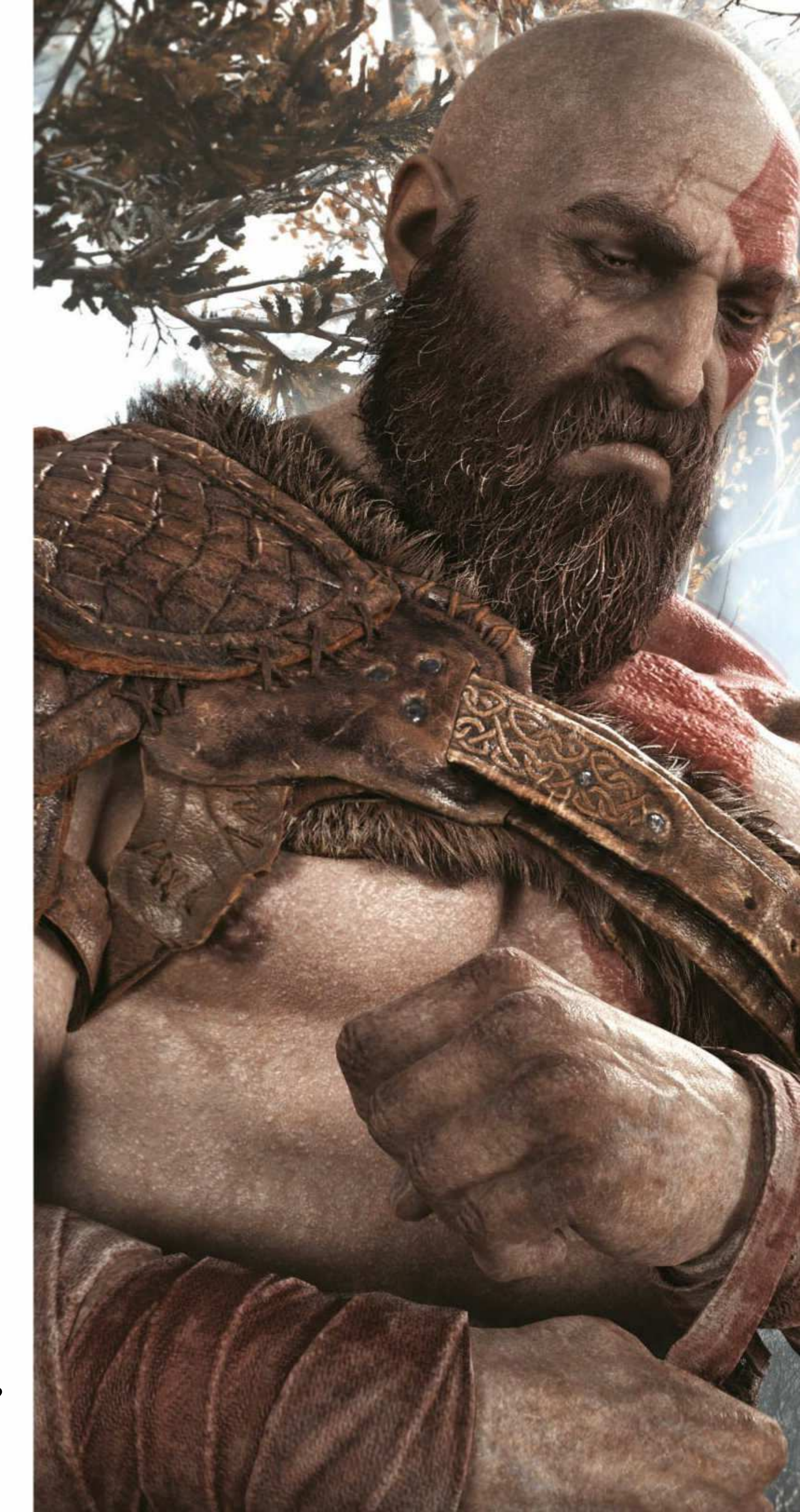
"IT'S SUCH A UNIQUE ELEMENT THAT GAMES HAVE OVER EVERY OTHER ENTERTAINMENT MEDIUM, THE FACT THAT YOU ARE THE STORY"

Reviews

70

GOD OF WAR

Has Sony Santa Monica Studio really managed to bring emotional weight to the killing machine Kratos?





THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













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ROCK ME, ATREUS

God Of War

It's no easy feat, humanising an antihero like Kratos. An unflinching wall of sinew and muscle, he's as cold as the frost crunching beneath his feet, neither relatable nor likeable, just blunt and a little bit broken, seemingly unmoved even by the soft sobs of his only child.

And it's strange, seeing our Kratos – that crazed murderer of Gods, hitherto driven by just rage and revenge – so stripped down. To know that he lives a simple existence in a modest single-roomed shack, that this plain, ordinary space is where this terrifying, extraordinary god eats and sleeps, drinks and thinks. Though still every bit the brick you-know-what-house we've come to know over the years, Kratos is now aged, his face ashen and lined, his beard flecked with grey, his shoulders stooping with the weight of every soul he's ever crushed, every heart he's ever ripped from the safety of its ribcage. He seems hollow now, as cold as the lifeless corpse of his son's recently deceased mother, his body a roadmap of scars, including those from where he had once strapped Blades of Chaos to his arms.

Throughout this story Kratos occasionally turns and picks up his son, Atreus, to help him down from a steep height. He lifts the child as though just picking a daisy, his hands – those huge, strong, terrifying hands that we've seen snap necks like pencils – dwarfing the child's entire midriff. Sometimes, Atreus clings to his father's back in a lopsided piggy-back, implicitly trusting his father to get him safely up the mountain side, or across the precipice. But not once does Kratos touch his boy in any way that looks comforting or supportive. There are no moments of affection or connection. And while *God of War* doesn't quite deliver the paternal pain of Sony's other poster child, *The Last of Us*, every time we watch Atreus try and reach out to Kratos only to be unceremoniously spurned, it hurts a little more.

But this isn't even Kratos' story, really. It's dressed up that way – that's who you play as, the camera pulled in tight over his mountainous right shoulder – but as you pick your way through the story – a simple tale of a grieving man and child trekking through the snow to fulfil their dearly departed's dying wishes – you'll notice things, small things, like the way the bestiary is written from the perspective of an awed child. It's just window-dressing, a simple vehicle through which *God of War*'s spectacular set-pieces and legendary hack 'n' slash combat are driven.

It's all a bit flamboyant at first, though. You'll ooh and aah at the beautiful set-pieces – the frozen vistas, the craggy shorelines, the huge monoliths glittering above dark, still waters; you can't help but be impressed – but until you get to grips with the game's unique, if perplexing, world, it's all a bit clinical and showboaty. Yes, the travel sequences can be overly long, but does Atreus need to cram each silence with unsolicited lore and exposition? It detracts from an otherwise timely opportunity to collect your thoughts and plan your next steps, especially as, most frustrating of all, half of these interruptions end with: "Know what? I'll finish this story later."

At first, the latest offering in Kratos' franchise is a confusing one, your environments stuffed with things you can't do, reach or interact with and the 'fast travel' system is hilariously unhelpful and unuseable for much of the game. And it's peculiar, how *much* you can't do, especially as it's unclear – beyond the occasional hint from Atreus, although that's not always a given – if you can't do something because you don't yet have the skill or equipment to do so, or if it's just because you're... well, a bit crap.

And he's not a fun chap to be around, that Kratos. Sure, he's always been something of a mardy bum, but parenthood has done little to sweeten this grumpy fecker up, which means it's harder than ever to connect with him given he can't spare a moment to console his grieving son. On a handful of occasions you'll see Kratos reach out, hand hovering inches from his son's small shoulders as if to comfort him, only to withdraw it with a weary sigh, but it gets tiresome, those curt, cutting replies to Atreus' innocent ponderings. Depending upon your viewpoint, you'll find it a simple shortcut to illustrate a father struggling to communicate meaningfully with his son... or a well-trodden cliche that falls just on the wrong side of contrived.

The narrative beats don't always match the action in front of you, either. One moment, Atreus is tearfully pleading with you, the next he's mooching around like a sullen toddler.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CLASSY COMBAT: Combat is smoother and more polished than ever, with plenty of opportunities to mix 'n' match special powers with your spartan rage to ensure your fights remain fresh.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: SIE Sony Santa Monica
PRICE: £52.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Above: "Do as I say, not as I do, kiddo. Just because I got this tattoo when I was plastered on a stag do in Benidorm doesn't mean it's okay for you to go out and get one, too."

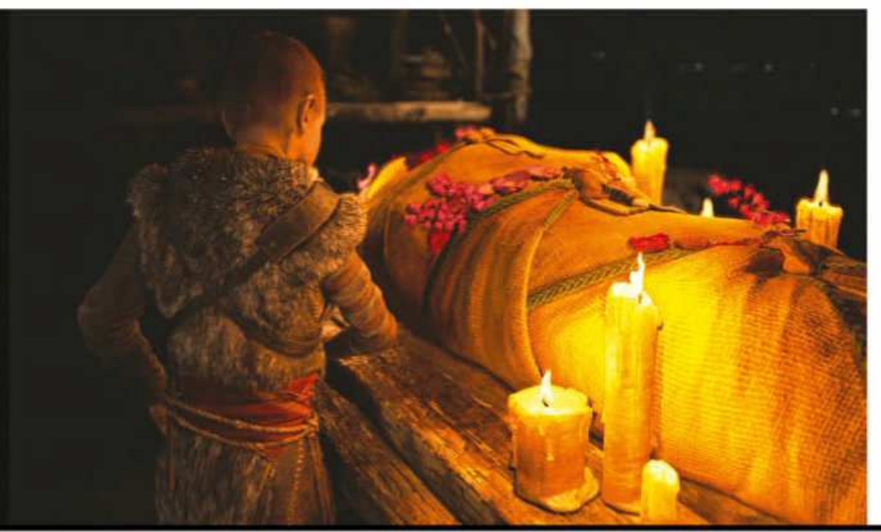




Above: Yes, that's a guy melded into a tree. Yes, he has one glowy eye and horns. No, it will not be the strangest thing you see in this game. We're just thankful he grew moss to cover his most, uh, *sensitive* areas.

YOU'LL OOH AND AAH AT THE FROZEN VISTAS, THE CRAGGY SHORELINES, THE MONOLITHS GLITTERING ABOVE STILL WATERS; YOU CAN'T HELP BUT BE IMPRESSED

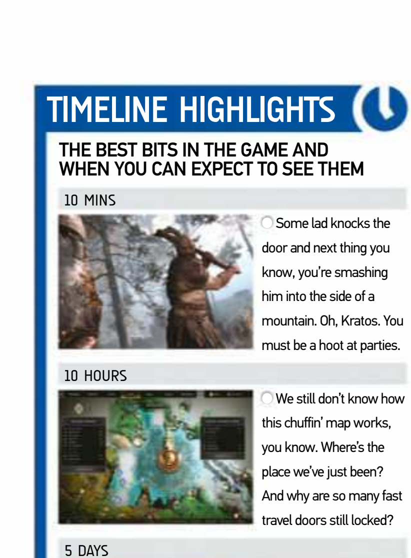




RUNIC REWARDS

Throughout the realms you'll stumble across dozens of treasure chests, ranging from small boxes Kratos can simply rip open with his bare hands, to others that are mysteriously sealed by runic magic.

Simple, right? Except it isn't. Some won't always be available right away – Kratos or Atreus may be missing the specific tool or ability to even access them – and others require Kratos to either find the special seals and break them, or ring bells in a specific order. It's worth doing as many as you can, though; unlock them and you'll be able to feast on the goodies within, with rewards ranging from boosts to your rage and life bars, to precious resources needed to level up your talismans.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS

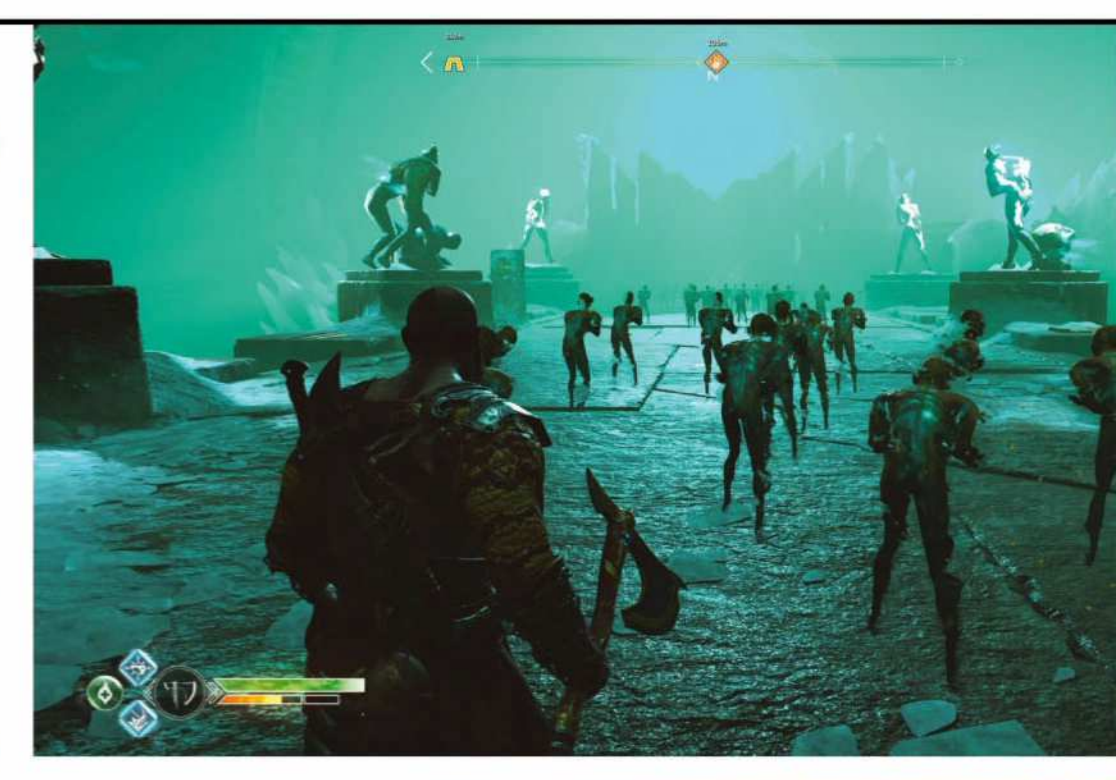
Some lad knocks the door and next thing you know, you're smashing him into the side of a mountain. Oh, Kratos. You must be a hoot at parties.

10 HOURS

We still don't know how this chuffin' map works, you know. Where's the place we've just been? And why are so many fast travel doors still locked?

5 DAYS

Campaign finally over? Sweet. Now it's time to head back out to Midgard and visit all those boat docks. You never know what you might find…



Above: This is Hel. We reckon they're all queuing for the single open window in the post office. **Below:** It'll take a while to be granted the ability to unlock them, admittedly, but eventually you stumble into one of the Hidden Chambers of Odin. Secreted within you'll find treasure and several angry enemies pretty keen on murdering you…





Above: Can't decide if these poor souls perished from an undercooked salmon mousse or someone's refusal to put on the central heating. Wait – what's that frozen in the ice on the left? This isn't going to end well, is it.

LEVELLING UP

The fastest way to beef up for your battles is to get familiar with *God of War*'s bewildering stats and loadout screens. The former helps you finesse Kratos' performance to your preferred fighting style, boosting your: strength (duh), runic (attacks and elemental damage), defence (as you'd expect), vitality (health and resilience), luck (boosts XP and Hacksilver gains), and cooldown (the time it takes to recharge your special abilities).

But as well as upgrading with your XP, you can also tweak these stats by utilising talismans you'll find secreted throughout the realms. These are attached to weapons rather than passive skills, so couple these with regularly trading XP for your skill-tree – again, chiefly weapon-based – and you'll be formidable in no time.





One second he's muttering "whatever" under his breath, the next – summoned to your side to translate something, perhaps – he'll instantly respond with an upbeat "Yes, SIR!". No, it's not a hangable offence, but it is jarring, momentarily kicking you out of a story that you might only have a slippery grasp of in the first place. (There was also a strange five minutes when Atreus incessantly screamed: "THE FIRE'S OUT – PORTSIDE!" long after we reached terra firma. Again, it's not a deal breaker, we know, but… well, we could've done without it.)

It's not all so serious, though. There's a smattering of light relief, brought most notably by the dwarf siblings tasked with keeping your weapons razor sharp and stabby, but Kratos remains ever surly and serious, often stopping to lecture Atreus on the spoils, sacrifices and sobriety of war. And by gods, do you kill a lot of stuff; while admittedly Sony has pared back the visceral violence the series has become renowned for, there's still plenty of bodies to pummel, with some foes – chiefly larger enemies and boss battles, as you might expect – retaining the eye-wateringly painful finishing moves so many of us hate to love… and love to hate, of course.

The combat itself is as satisfying as ever, your Blades of Chaos – lost at the end of the previous game – are replaced by the Leviathan axe, our shiny new toy. While it's a perfectly adequate replacement, strengthened further still by the talismans and new abilities you unlock along the way, it lacks the Blades' fiery finesse. But combat remains meaty and frenetic, with each tweak to your RPG-esque stats screen – though outrageously convoluted at first – keeping your fights fresh and frantic.

Atreus, to his credit, is a worthy companion too, especially if you've managed to up-skill his abilities and bow sooner rather than later. While your axe has decent damage and range, you'll come to rely on Atreus' long-range and precision accuracy more than you might have expected. And it's not just a matter of hacking anything that moves, either; a selection of elemental enemies, some of which are immune to the icy shot of the axe, require tactical forethought, and it's here that Atreus truly shines – just look in the direction of the enemy you want him to attack, hit the action button, and it's done.

And pretty much every type of battle is here and up for grabs. Spectacular boss fight on the back of a dragon? Check. Arena-based hordes secreted in hidden chambers? Check. A stunning, hectic battle set atop a flying Norse ship? Check. Fighting enemies in *God of War* may be repetitive, but it's rarely a chore.

Progression *is* a slog, though. It'll take hours upon hours to unlock the whole of the duo's skill-trees, and longer still to keep buffing your RPG stats – strength, defence, luck, vitality and so on – to acceptable levels. You'll amass XP with each defeated enemy, puzzle and/or mission – slowly, at least at first, but building in generosity the more you play – and Hacksilver, *God of War*'s internal currency, available freely throughout the realms, too (pro tip: smash every single destructible prop you can find, as many coins can be found at the bottom of vases and wooden crates). Frustratingly, some of those skill-tree combos and bonuses – though available once your weapon's at the right grade and you have enough cash – are tied to these stats, resulting in a strange scenario where you're able to unlock skills but can't use them, your vitality score still sitting at, say, a measly 45 when you need 125 to utilise it.

Your journey will take you to some gorgeous places where the snow crunches underfoot and exotic flora and fauna dance in and out of sunbeams. Rooted wholly in the nine realms of Norse mythology, each place offers its own distinct landmarks, although much of your time will be spent in and around Midgard (home of the humans) and the craggy inlets dotted around the enormous Lake of Nine (little delights us more than the sound of clunking over the Alfheimian light bridges). There's a considerable amount of backtracking, though, and while the game is certainly less rigid than its predecessors, it's not quite a sandbox, either, offering a smattering of side-quests that can be soaked up in-between the otherwise pretty linear, if meaty, campaign missions.

The environmental puzzles, too, are delightful, offering the perfect cerebral respite from the hack 'n' slash combat. Again, you'll encounter many things you'll be unable to interact with on your first visit, but revisiting these areas once you've completed the campaign and carry the full set of tools invariably offers a wonderful array of stashed secrets, your curiosity – especially if you're a lover of collectibles – forever piqued by the "percentage explored" score sitting on the map of every area. They're not all easy, either, with some of the chests locked by mystical runes offering a fair few surprises as you experiment with your arsenal, learning to scour each area carefully, looking up as well as down.

Exploring comes with its own challenges, and not all are just enemies out to murder you, either. Climbing or descending the craggy terrain requires you to look directly at the place you wish to move to next, so unless you've already planned out a route, you can't just hammer the action button with one hand and drink a Coke with the other and hope to reach there (Nathan Drake, we're looking at you). Nope, unless you *know* where you're going, Kratos will just hang there. A small but fabulous detail, we hope you'll agree.

It's a game of two halves, *God of War*. For the first dozen or so hours you may find yourself frustrated by the slow levelling up, a bewildering map system, and perplexing storyline stuffed with gated areas and treasures. Stick with it, though; the more you do, the more of the realms you'll open… and that's when the fun *really* begins.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GET EXPLORING: While it's a pretty linear story, there are plenty of side missions to force you out into the realms, so take time to help out NPCs – the rewards make it worth it.

FAQs

Q. TIME TO COMPLETION?
This is a stonkingly huge game, offering a good 25-30 hours in the main campaign mission alone. Yes, your trigger fingers will cramp up, but it's so worth it.

Q. PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE?
While it might be helpful to know a little of Kratos' past, it's not mandatory. Some Norse mythology might be useful, mind.

Q. IS IT JUST A FANCY ESCORT MISSION?
Nah, not this time! While it's true Atreus is always accompanying you, it's okay – he can hold his own.

TO BEGIN WITH, YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF FRUSTRATED BY THE SLOW LEVELLING-UP, A BEWILDERING MAP SYSTEM, AND SO MANY GATED AREAS




VERDICT 9/10

LIKE KRATOS, THIS GAME GETS BETTER WITH TIME.

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

Forgotton Anne

When it comes to detailing the virtues of games, the term 'cinematic' is bandied around so often that its significance is all but lost. However, there are few games as deserving of the accolade as *Forgotton Anne*. Its picturesque visuals and the seamless transition between cutscenes and gameplay make this one of the most cinematic adventures we've ever had the pleasure of playing. The striking anime style makes it feel every bit like you're playing through a Studio Ghibli production, while its tone and narrative is delightfully reminiscent of the Eighties live-action/animated movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

Forgotton Anne explores the concept of Forgotlings. Think of that missing sock, discarded toaster or old journal you've cast away or lost: in *Forgotton Anne* all of these abandoned items end up in another world where they can walk, talk and do things far beyond their intended purpose. For instance, a handgun heads up the police, while a fridge spends his days tending the local bar. It all makes for a set-up that's wonderfully zany and undeniably endearing.

You play as Anne, tasked with maintaining order by dealing with the world's rebel objects. Underneath *Forgotton Anne*'s painterly visuals and colourful characters lies a surprisingly dark and layered plot that's rife with player choice. Dialogue options give you the opportunity to be a merciless law enforcer or more sympathetic towards the plight of the freedom fighters, and player actions have an effect on the story and the outcome of events.

While narrative is the main focus here, gameplay certainly hasn't been overlooked. Anima is the life-force of this world and its inhabitants, and it serves as the driving force behind the game's intricate puzzle elements. Most conundrums involve redirecting the flow of anima through pipes to power levers and open doors to progress forward. Puzzles often have multiple components that require a decent amount of thought, however, they don't jeopardise the flow of the story by being overly taxing or numerous.

Light platforming sections are also present. Anne can run and jump around this gloomy, industrial city, and thanks to some mechanical wings, she can even soar into the air. While the animations are spectacular, the controls can feel rather unintuitive and clunky. As well as context-sensitive climbing sections that require pinpoint accuracy, Anne wings require manual activation, so feats like running jumps require four buttons to perform. This becomes particularly cumbersome later in the game when obstacles such as timed platforms are introduced.

With an engaging plot that's as much a commentary on consumerism as it is a tale of morality, *Forgotton Anne*'s inspired narrative is backed up by some solid and engaging gameplay. A fair warning, though, discarding everyday objects will be met with a considerable amount of guilt after playing this.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: ThroughLine Games
PRICE: £15.59
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS: NIGHT IN THE WOODS



WORSE THAN: ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DECISIONS, DECISIONS: There are often numerous solutions to difficult situations; one option usually involves 'distilling' these delightful objects – essentially killing them – however, creative thinking can result in a more peaceful outcome.





VERDICT 8/10

AN ANIME ADVENTURE YOU'RE NOT LIKELY TO FORGET





Above: Although the overarching plot is somewhat predictable, the personification of everyday objects – with their imaginative designs and excellent voice work – makes interacting with the game's unorthodox cast an utter delight.

ICING ON THE CITY-BUILDING CAKE

Frostpunk

You think you're a good person, and then the coal runs out. Everything is freezing over and suddenly you're sending a small child out into the elements to fix dangerous machinery – you care little for their survival, so long as your generator whirs back into action. In most city-building sims you're battling budgets and sewage issues. In *Frostpunk* the biggest threats you'll face are falling temperatures and the desolation of your population. And yes, that's really one of the gauges you need to watch out for. This engrossing, beautifully bleak sim from 11 Bit Studios isn't messing around.

You build your city out in a circular pattern from a central generator. It's aesthetically pleasing, but it gets tricky quickly as you expand your borders. The further anything is from the central point the colder it becomes, and as the temperature drops you need to upgrade your generator or build up heat, all of which costs precious resources. Ignore it though, and work stops, people get sick and your Hope gauge plummets. Victory comes from managing resources like people, coal, wood, food and steel to eventually building a self-sustaining town. Different campaigns have different win rates: in one you'll need to grow a city and survive a great storm, in another you have to keep all important seed stores from icing over. Away from the city you'll spend your time picking your way through pleasingly fertile upgrade trees, making new laws to set the priorities for your population and sending out scout parties to hunt for resources, survivors and potential outposts. Take your eye off your main city for too long, however, and people may lose hope and start to leave, resources can start to run low and a cold snap can throw everything into disarray.

The sheer number of threats can be intimidating at first, and no one will judge you for fiddling with some of the scenario sliders after you've been deposed for the 17th time in a row for limiting food rations to soup and forcing the children to work (the tiny scroungers). Stick with it though and you'll find it to be engrossing, forcing you to think fast and aggressively to survive some truly torrid conditions. You're constantly pushed to make decisions about the fate of the sick, the dead and the young, and no matter what you choose someone *will* suffer. *Frostpunk* is a reminder that sometimes there are no easy choices.

Listening to all of this, it might sound like a bad date with somebody studying for their degree in philosophy and history, though, thankfully, the themes never feel heavy handed or purposefully obtuse. They are just part of the greater web of decisions you need to make as your city grows, as other survivors appear through the snow, as a great storm looms and as newcomers need shelter. At its cold, frostbitten heart, *Frostpunk* is a game of decisions, and what makes it so satisfying is they all matter.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SURVIVAL OF THE WARMEST: *Frostpunk* builds its gameplay around a desperate population, rather than flashy buildings or finances, and delivers a much more impactful experience. You'll find shinier city-building games, but you won't find any that make every decision feel quite so much like life and death.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: 11 bit studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit 3.2 GHz Dual Core CPU, Windows 7/8/10 64-bit, 4 GB RAM, GeForce GTX 660, Radeon R7 370 or equivalent with 2 GB of video RAM, DirectX 11, 8 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SIMCITY





CITIES: SKYLINES

WORSE THAN



SOMEHOW IMPROVES A CLASSIC GENRE WITH SNOW AND MISERY



The Automatons can be discovered on expeditions or built in a factory, and can replace whole teams of people at the mines, sawmills and even infirmaries.

AN ABUNDANCE OF KILLER INSTINCT CAN LEAD TO…

Extinction

On paper it sounds thrilling – one man against an army of ogres both small and gargantuan, combining the fast-paced combat of, say, a *Bayonetta* with the light puzzle aspects of tackling giants from, say, *Shadow Of The Colossus*. Sadly, *Extinction* falls way short of its stated goal, instead offering lukewarm (though still fast-paced) combat on the ground and is an exercise in frustration when it comes to battling the big boys.

The world under siege in *Extinction* sets the stage with some back story and (too much) in-game exposition, but really it's just window dressing for a few dozen missions both short in length and with little to keep your interest. It basically boils down to: kill *x* ogres, protect *x* civilians/ buildings, or survive for *x* amount of time. During any of these missions you'll be scuttling around at a quick pace, tapping a single attack button as if channelling your inner *Dynasty Warrior*, and eventually tackling a giant ogre in a sequence far easier than it should be. It's straightforward to the point of banality – and while rarely outright bad, *Extinction* does nothing of real note. It's the same, on repeat, with the same challenges and the same frustrations.

Strategy comes into play at points, with the giant ogres kitted out in different forms of armour. Some are broken with one 'rune strike' – your special, time-slowing super-hit – while others require careful aiming at weak points before they can be shattered. Some can't be broken at all. This is where the extremely light puzzle aspect of things comes into play – how can you get to an ogre's weak point, its neck, if you can't ground it? The solution usually involves jumping or using your grappling whip to drag yourself up its body. And, really, that's about it for strategy.

It very quickly becomes apparent that there isn't much below the surface of *Extinction*; a few different timings to learn, which button presses activate different combos, and a few new powers can be unlocked and quickly learned a few missions into the seven-chapter campaign. But there's nothing to keep your attention once the initial fun of running up a giant's back and lopping its head off has faded – and really, it fades all too quickly.

Extinction tries to keep players involved by offering daily challenges, 'extinction' (survival against waves of giants), and randomly generated skirmishes. It's a fair effort, but when the *more* you're being offered is more of the thing that's already worn incredibly thin, it makes little to no difference. It's a shame, as *Extinction* is a good idea – it's just pulled off with next-to-zero panache, and before the first couple of hours are up you'll either be willing it to finish, or just turning it off.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

INDEFATIGABLE: Extinction's mode that shares the game's title really pushes the player to keep going until their fingers lock up. It's a fun survival/boss rush mode and is good to blow off some steam.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Modus Games
DEVELOPER: Iron Galaxy
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: Skills are unlocked using XP earned in missions, and can follow whatever path you choose. Ultimately, you can unlock everything – but it's a genuine question whether or not you'll even still be playing the game.

BETTER THAN
AOT: WINGS OF FREEDOM



WORSE THAN
SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS



VERDICT 4/10
MISGUIDED, UNFAIR AND BORING: A POOR MIX



Above: Civilians require rescuing throughout, and offer a bonus to your XP should you get them out with the teleport crystals they huddle around. When you have to protect a certain amount of civvies, though, *Extinction* becomes an exercise in incredible frustration.




Each dome is a separate entity, which flies in the face of the idea of establishing a new human community on Mars.

ALIEN ANT FARM

Surviving Mars

Your very first attempt at taming the hostile Red Planet is going to be a write off. Even if you pay attention to the indirect hints quietly appearing at the top of the screen, you're going to build structures in the wrong places, you're going to prioritise the wrong aspects of base management and you're going to struggle even to understand the purpose of core functions behind the game. But take the easiest challenge and let those failures happen, because once the first shuttle on the inevitable restart gently touches the dusty ground of Earth's distant cousin you'll be all the better prepared to plan, manage and cultivate life on Mars.

It's an intriguing spin on the city builder genre: you're not manipulating the masses, guiding gridlocked traffic or catering to a fluctuating supply and demand, instead you're intricately preparing a whole other planet for human habilitation. And while we might be at the risk of overselling *Surviving Mars*, there's a certain charm to the concept. Automated drones are the first to touch the surface, but they're really just the scouting party, surveying the land and building the groundwork for the first living creatures on the planet. In that sense there are certain needs that must be fulfilled, oxygen and water for the humans but, later, an infrastructure for construction, self-sufficiency and, ultimately, exports back to Earth. It is initially confusing, but there's a good level of micromanagement that will keep the player hooked. The manual movement of resources, for example, is surprisingly important to sustaining the fledgling community, especially if certain sources are located some distance from the main hub. Inhabitants of each dome must have their needs met, too, and since every person comes with their own unique name, skillsets and positive or negative traits there's a sense of having to make the right choices to ensure a healthy and functioning base.

But for as much as it has the ability to engross the player, eventually and far too promptly the novelty of *Surviving Mars* does wear off. The pace, for one, can be equally arduous and anti-climatic; the prep takes the longest part, and once the new structure is ready the base barely feels any better for it. There's an unfortunate limitation to everything, too. Larger domes can be unlocked, new and subtly different structures can be applied to them and enhancements can be gained in the randomly shuffled tech tree, but there's no purpose to any of it. The goal for any city-building simulation is to empower players so that they feel self-motivated to tweak, enhance and - most important of all – expand. But with *Surviving Mars* you'll find yourself adding to existing infrastructure simply because it's there and not because it's necessary or, perhaps most disappointing of all, even interesting. The game has a framework that could be captivating, which is an achievement considering its slow pace, but there's simply not enough content, not enough of a symbiotic connection between the various systems and certainly not enough compulsion to survive Mars.



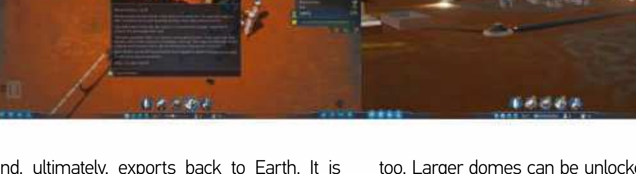
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Bulgaria
PUBLISHER: Paradox Interactive
DEVELOPER: Haemimont Games
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit operating system, dual-core CPU, Intel integrated video HD 4000 or higher, 4GB RAM, 10GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN **ANNO 2205**



WORSE THAN **CITIES SKYLINES**



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DOME SWEET DOME: The games systems just don't meld together, and as a result there's no sense that this is a functioning habitat. Your Martians are just employees with quirks, and the only reason you might choose to expand is because there's plenty of space to do so.


VERDICT 6/10
A GREAT FOUNDATION, BUT SADLY A GIANT MISSTEP

POINT-AND-CLICK PUZZLING WITH A CHERRY ON TOP

Chuchel



Above: Scenarios in *Chuchel* are as simple and nonsensical as this: there's the cherry in a pool of water that's in the head of weird yellow creature, now you click on some stuff until Chuchel and Kekel find a way to get to it.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Czech Republic
PUBLISHER: Amanita Design
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Windows 7, 8 or 10, 2.3GHz Dual Core, 1GB RAM, Intel HD 4000, 1GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

If Salvador Dalí and Terry Gilliam collaborated on a videogame remake of the bits from Ice Age where that squirrel repeatedly tries to get hold of an elusive acorn, you might end up with something like *Chuchel*. The acorn, in this case, is a cherry. The role of the agitated squirrel who is repeatedly foiled in his attempts to get his desired treasure to comedic effect is played by a small furry creature called Chuchel.

Chuchel finds himself being tortured by a giant hand that reaches down out of the sky to pick him up and put him and his beloved cherry in situations where the two of them are kept apart by some obstacle. Here is where you come in. Sometimes you'll have to solve a simple puzzle to get to the cherry, sometimes you need do nothing more than click on whatever is in front of you to make something strange or funny happen, and sometimes you'll find yourself playing a minigame.

Save for Chuchel's occasional rivalry and sometimes collaboration with another cherry-loving creature named Kekel, there isn't any connective tissue of substance between each of the game's scenarios. Instead, *Chuchel* is presented as a series of vignettes. Each is a bespoke clickable toy for you to play with. A delightful digital construction that will have you revelling in the artistry of its animation and the skill with which its soundtrack is interwoven with the action taking place on the screen. This isn't a game about the complexity of its interactions – a signpost will soon pop up to give you the option of seeing the solution to a puzzle if you struggle for even a short time – but rather about enjoying seeing it in motion. Indeed, despite its obvious silliness, we were struck by the sheer beauty of the thing in almost every scene it presented us.

The world of *Chuchel* is a pleasurably surreal one to play in. It is full of bizarre creatures and frequently takes unexpected turns, usually in pursuit of comedy. It is not laugh-out-loud funny, but there is something undeniably likable about its lighthearted nature and it's always fun to watch its quirky titular character lose its rag with almost every creature it encounters.

We can imagine this game's short length and relative lack of complexity leaving those expecting a more traditional point-and-click in the vain of Amanita Design's previous titles, *Machinarium*, or even *Botanicula* (with which *Chuchel* shares more in common), feeling disappointed. However, we would argue there is something of value to be found precisely in *Chuchel*'s defying of expectations. You won't find a lot of games out there like this little curio, nor many made with the level of craft possessed by the incredibly talented team that made it.

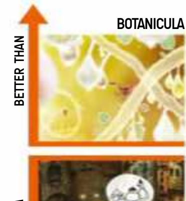
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FLAPPY ABSURD: *Chuchel* has a *Flappy Bird*-style section that we could have done without playing through. It's so brief that it feels a bit churlish to even bother pointing it out, but in a game this short, there's little excuse for chaff.

BETTER THAN

BOTANICULA





MACHINARIUM

WORSE THAN





Above: Chuchel is an angry little thing and the frustration and escalating rage he experiences is communicated brilliantly without any need for words. His cries of anguish and the game's amazing animation tell you all you need to know.







VERDICT 7/10

A SHORT, SIMPLE SHOWCASE OF ARTISTIC TALENT

It's not all bad in *Minit*. Sure you're under a very bad, no-good death curse and the world is rendered in only two tones, but at least the characters you encounter have a sense of humour.

EVERY SECOND COUNTS

Minit

It is generally ill-advised to pick up swords you find parted from their masters. Whether they be embedded in stone or seemingly left out for anyone to take, there's usually a good reason for their placement. In this case, it's a 60-second death curse; no matter what you do, as long as they're bound to that cursed sword, your adorable Tamagotchi-esque protagonist will keel over every time a minute ticks down. You're going to need to get a move on if you want to change your fate.

With only items and key events persisting through every minute run, *Minit*'s retro, roguelike influences are obvious. Its scope and length pales in comparison to modern behemoths of the genre, such as *Spelunky* or *Rogue Legacy*, but though small it is perfectly formed. It's not one to out-stay its welcome, achieving only what it set out to do and then getting the heck out of there, much like you will be doing throughout your own playthrough.

The humour of the briefest lines of dialogue is pure-hearted, coming from a cast of cute characters that presents a world well worth getting to know. The ever-ticking timer encourages you to explore efficiently and there are few areas or puzzles that set out to purposefully waste your precious seconds. Anti-frustration design ensures none of your deaths feel wasted or cheap, however, and instead creates a 'popcorn effect' until, after a chain of deaths, you find yourself staring down the endgame asking, "Where did the time go?"

As you explore, you're able to discover new 'homes' to respawn into after your untimely demise, enabling you to cover more ground in your next life. Due to the game's simple visual aesthetic, each screen is distinct in a way that minimises the likelihood of you losing your bearings as the sand in the hourglass runs out. Because of a stubborn adherence to a two-toned palette, against the current wave of vibrant retro-styled titles, *Minit* presents something new by going even further back.

The timer can complicate troubleshooting for certain conundrums, though thankfully solutions can either be discovered close to home or within what time you have left. Time-wasting design only presents itself when you begin hunting for secrets and the frustration of these treasure hunts can be easily counteracted by other hidden goodies if you're willing to dig for them. Your first run is rewarding as it is, however a second playthrough still has plenty to uncover.

Between the pitch-perfect length, a cast of cheeky characters you just want to pinch and a distinct visual style you'll be left with a lasting fond impression. Short, sweet and filled to the brim with charm, you won't want to drop this one in a hot minute.

VERDICT 8/10
A SHORT BUT SWEET ROGUE-LITE ADVENTURE.

DETAILS

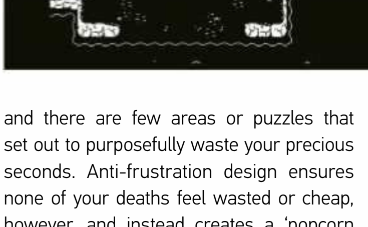
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Vlambeer
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: THE SWORDS OF DITTO

WORSE THAN: UNDERTALE









FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MILE A MINUTE: Many modern roguelikes soon prove to be serious undertakings but *Minit* presents bitesized chunks of play in 60 seconds or less. The perfect game if you're short for time or put off by more punishing games of the genre.

Solving the puzzles guides us through *Q.U.B.E. 2*'s mysterious story. Will we be able to send Amelia Cross back home?

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Q.U.B.E. 2



Toxic Games has managed to create a game that harnesses its obvious inspiration from existing first-person puzzle games, rather than simply copying them. Focusing on the core concept of its predecessor and stripping away its restrictive shell, *Q.U.B.E. 2* challenges us to be even more involved in finding solutions this time around. Here we are given the freedom to place brightly coloured blocks on a small set of blank squares to solve innovative puzzles, rather than simply press a button to interact with existing structures.

Q.U.B.E. 2 has perfected the pace of introducing new mechanics. It guides us just enough to ensure that we fully understand how our abilities are supposed to synergise, while masterfully avoiding the pitfalls of constructing a puzzle that is too easy or boring. Starting off slowly, the game demonstrates how cubes with only three different functions can be utilised together in order to escape multiple rooms. As we progress further, more objects are added, teaching us more about the versatility of our abilities in a sequentially evolving environment. In later puzzles the inclusion of fans, magnetic pads and fire, succeed in keeping actions that could easily slump into monotony feel fresh and interesting, all the while steadily ramping up the difficulty of the puzzles.

As we neared the end of the *Q.U.B.E. 2*'s story the rules changed once more, removing the limit on our powers and enabling us to place as many of each block as we please. This surprisingly late change in the game makes a sizeable difference, providing us with far more options and subsequently, far more opportunities for error. Although, while it may feel like we have full control on our puzzle-solving abilities, this is greatly juxtaposed to how our character feels for the duration of the game.

With its enigmatic plot, *Q.U.B.E. 2* makes an attempt to transcend the shallow feel of being just a first-person puzzler by offering us an explanation as to why we are continuously moving through strange, sterile rooms. That said, we did not feel particularly invested in the story or its protagonist, Amelia Cross. While a good portion of *Q.U.B.E. 2*'s failure to hook us can be attributed to poor voice acting and bland content between puzzles, we found that the core mechanics of the game were so strong that the redundant plot left only a small blemish on our overall enjoyment.

Despite the fact that *Q.U.B.E. 2* has very little replay value, it is an excellent pick for anyone craving a first-person puzzle game in the same vein as Valve's beloved *Portal*. With puzzles that are straightforward enough to evade frustration yet challenging enough to present a few glowing moments of realisation, this game exhibits all the traits of a studio that knows how to develop a fitting sequel to an imaginative concept.

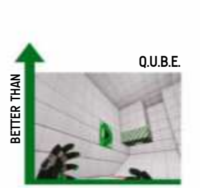


DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4
ORIGIN: United Kingdom
PUBLISHER: Trapped Nerve Games
DEVELOPER: Toxic Games
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

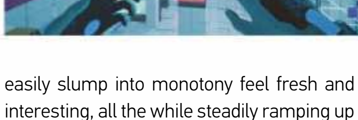
Q.U.B.E.



WORSE THAN



PORTAL



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MORE INPUT: Rather than simply activating the blocks at the correct moment, Toxic Games' sequel gives us the freedom to place the cubes ourselves. The result: a satisfying sense of achievement when everything fits together.

VERDICT 7/10

A WEAK STORY SAVED BY INNOVATIVE PUZZLE DESIGN

IF OUROBOROS REMADE THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

The Swords Of Ditto

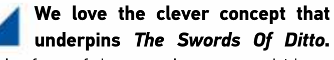


Below: There's a good variety of enemies with different attack patterns. Fortunately, you can accrue a range of tools to match, including new weapons and stickers, which can be equipped to buff your abilities.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: One Bit Beyond
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



We love the clever concept that underpins *The Swords Of Ditto.* We're fans of the game's many cool ideas. The catch, though, is that we're not sure that those ideas and that concept quite find themselves in equilibrium.

The Swords Of Ditto opens with you washing up on the shore of a beach, à la *Link's Awakening*. That's a signal that the game owes a big debt to The Legend of Zelda series: 2D sword-based combat, tools that can be unlocked by completing puzzle-filled dungeons, and a reality where slashing away at small clumps of grass is a viable way of earning money. The twist here is that after four days of exploring the game's compact world, you will be forced into a confrontation with the final boss: an evil witch named Mormo. If she defeats you (and she will), you take control of a new hero on a remixed map 100 years in the future, grab the eponymous Sword Of Ditto from the grave of your predecessor and start again.

Much of *Swords Of Ditto* is about time-management, then. Should you focus on collecting cash that will be passed on to the next hero, or spend it all to give yourself the best chance of taking Mormo down? Do you have time to explore, or should you focus on completing the dungeons that will remove Mormo's 'anchors', weakening her for your next fateful encounter? Those decisions become more interesting as the game progresses and you unlock the ability to carry over items to the next run and rewind time, the latter making failed runs far less annoying than they can be in the early going.

Less annoying, but still annoying. New dungeons are procedurally generated, but the relatively shallow ideas they use are repetitive and the bosses are too similar, so redoing key dungeons that were enjoyable the first time around can feel like a chore.

Swords Of Ditto's simple combat becomes increasingly compelling as you gain new tools to add variety to the slash, roll and repeat formula that forms its foundations – a golf club that you can use to thwack enemies off of ledges and into the abyss is one of our favourites – but get killed and lose those options and combat becomes boring again until you get some of those tools back. That's *Swords Of Ditto*'s fundamental problem: it *is* fun, but too often you have to push through limitations and repetition to find that fun. At times, you wonder whether the game wouldn't be better as a more traditional Legend Of Zelda-style RPG and that tells you that the balance isn't quite right when it comes to its rogue-like elements.

The experience of playing *The Swords Of Ditto* is as cyclical as the story it tells. It contrives to frustrate you, but then it reminds you that it can be enormous fun. It turns you off from playing it with a bad idea, then impresses you with a good one. Then it does it all over again.

MISSING LINK

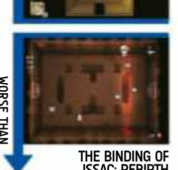
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THE LITTLE THINGS: The game is full of minor annoyances that could easily be ironed out, like having to wait for coins to finish bouncing to collect them or having to walk through a couple of screens and hear the same dialogue on every respawn.

BETTER THAN



ITTLE DEW



THE BINDING OF ISSAC: REBIRTH

WORSE THAN



Above: The roguelike elements that *The Sword Of Ditto* mixes in with the more traditional Legend Of Zelda-like exploration should work well together, and often do, but sometimes the balance is way off.



VERDICT 6/10

AN UNBALANCED BUT OFTEN ENJOYABLE RPG ROGUE-LITE.



"It's an incredible, rich, beautiful, RPG from the 90's that just slays"

KRIS PIOTROWSKI, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, CAPYBARA GAMES



WHY I ♥...

ULTIMA VII: BLACK GATE

KRIS PIOTROWSKI
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, CAPYBARA GAMES

A game that I love and I can't say one of my own? That's okay; I hate everything I've done so that's an easy one. I'm just kidding, I like some of my games! I will say **Ultima VII: Black Gates**. *I played it for the first time when I was 17… I played the entire* **Ultima VII** *quadrilogy actually, which is* **Ultima VII: Black Gate**, **Forge of Virtue**, **Silver Seed**, *and* **Serpent Isle**. *I remember when I played that as a kid; it blew my mind.*

There are a lot of classic games that I like to go back and replay every once in a while, but Ultima was one I had never replayed since I played it the first time – it's such a massive beast of RPG. And just recently I started it again. Started to just do it. And now I'm replaying it, a couple hours a night before bed. It's a masterpiece.

There's something about that game. The story, like the actual writing, the worlds… **Ultima VII** *is like, a wonder. There aren't a lot of games that have followed through on the kind of Ultima avatar, quest-type thing and I just wish there was more of that. And* **Below** *definitely isn't any sort of follow-up or anything, but there are definitely some aspects of* **Ultima VII**'*s world design in there – I didn't even realise that it had crawled under my skin like that until I started playing it again, and I was like, "Oh shit! That's from* **Ultima VII**!*".*

So, yeah, that's my game. That's one of my favourite games of all time. Replaying it, reassuming the avatar, was just like, for me, it holds up, and I love it. It's an incredible, rich, beautiful, RPG from the 90's that just slays.

RETRO

NO.200



88 THE RETRO GUIDE TO
TIM SCHAFER & DOUBLE FINE

The Double Fine founder takes time out with us to talk us through his entire career from SCUMMlet to studio head and creative director



BEHIND THE SCENES OF
96 TOMB RAIDER

It's a story often reflected upon, but just how did Core Design end up making one of gaming's biggest icons and most groundbreaking 3D games of the Nineties? We find out this issue



RETRO INTERVIEW:
102 ROLAND PERRY

As the hand behind the tech of the Amstrad range, Perry played a massive role in the home computers success, even getting a character named after him. We catch up with him to learn more



GAME-CHANGERS
106 ANOTHER WORLD

One of the first games to truly mix a cinematic sensibility into its videogame action, we delve into the presentation and design of Eric Chahi's passion project

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO... TIM SCHAFER & DOUBLE FINE

Looking back over the credits and contributions of a gaming great in his own words

AS PART OF our 200th issue celebration, we wanted to do something a little special for our complete guide, and we could think of no better concept than sitting down with one of our all-time favourite game makers to have him talk us through his career game by game. Tim Schafer was kind enough to spare us some time after receiving his BAFTA Fellowship and between promoting the latest Double Fine Presents titles to reflect on his illustrious and storied career.

What you'll find, as we did speaking with him, is a CV of titles that is packed with ideas, passion and a generosity of spirit that has now been distilled in the company he runs. So as this list of titles continues, the projects of Double Fine as a company, for which Schafer is overall creative director, also come into the conversation. From *Monkey Island* to *Double Fine Happy Action Theater*, he's had the chance to experiment with a wide array of game styles and is now looking ahead to the return of one of his most celebrated and beloved titles, *Psychonauts*. So without further ado, let's journey into the memories of Tim Schafer.





INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE: THE ACTION GAME 1989

TESTER (SORT OF)

So I studied creative writing and computer science in college, and then I just happened to get that job at Lucas looking for programmers who could write, but they hired us, and they weren't quite ready for us to work yet. They hired four, what they called, SCUMMlets, which are people who can use the language SCUMM, which is the internal house scripting tool.

So I started as a tester, I had a time sheet and I would be there all night. I remember I found a crash bug if you jumped off the tiles that spelled Jehovah, and I walked into the room to tell them all, and they looked at me like, 'Jerk." So saying that I worked on that game is a stretch, because it was only a few nights. But I was hired as a programmer. It would be dishonest to say that I started as a tester.



THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND 1990

WRITER, DESIGNER

We first had SCUMM university, which was where we learned how to use SCUMM. People like Steve Purcell worked there doing art and would give us some Sam & Max art that he'd made, long before he made a Sam & Max game. We were just playing with that and learning how it works and Ron [Gilbert] would come up and teach us every day something new, they would come and check on our progress, and I think he was observing us and seeing what our styles were, because he then chose Dave Grossman and I to work with him on *The Secret Of Monkey Island*. He pitched the game to us, and we got to brainstorm with him and try to help with the puzzles. He had a kind of puzzle flow diagram, he had the story and stuff for the game, and then I started writing dialogue for it. It was always going to be a comedy, it was always a funny game, but I thought my dialogue was temporary because I wasn't writing with any pirate lore or in mannered pirate language. I was just writing in my own voice and so was Dave, we were just cracking jokes, and then Ron was like, "No, this is the game. This is what it's going to sound like." And I was like, "What!?" But I think that creatively helped me a lot because if you can take the pressure off and pretend that you're not writing final dialogue then you can just let your creativity flow a little more.





MONKEY ISLAND 2: LECHUCK'S REVENGE 1991

WRITER, DESIGNER

I remember we just ploughed right into *Monkey Island 2*. I think maybe Ron knew we just had to get started before management started asking too many questions. And that worked. I think the first game only took about nine months to make, which seems crazy now. The next game maybe took a little bit more; about a year maybe. Those were really special times, especially working at the [Lucas] Ranch in this incredible environment that was set up just to make creative people relaxed and comfortable. It was a fun environment with Ron and Dave and Steve Purcell and Mike Ebert and Bucky [Martin 'Bucky' Cameron] and all these people were so fun to work with. Getting that job right out of college was a really lucky break for me, and I'm glad I was ready for exactly that job description.



MANIAC MANSION: DAY OF THE TENTACLE 1993

DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, DESIGNER, WRITER

It was a little bit like what I imagine it would be in movies and TV when you become a made man, Ron was kind of like the boss who is like, "Dave and Tim are ready. They're made." I had never had to run a project; Dave and I both sat and thought, and that's one of the hardest things to do: come up with an idea. What do you want to do? We were just kind of stunned. Then Ron was like, "Do you guys want to make a sequel to Mansion?" He had a little five-page doc about time travel and the basic idea of the toxic sludge, and we were like, "Yes!" because we were so terrified of having to come up with our own. And Dave's a great writer and a great brainstormer.

It was inspired by Chuck Jones cartoons, and we got to meet him and show him the game. We set up a meeting with Chuck, and got him a hotel room in the city because he was there for some show and showed him the game. We were just hoping he would say something nice that we could use as a blurb on the box. But the only thing that he really said was, "Why did you bring me here?" But he liked the game and he tried to recruit our background artist afterwards, so we took that as a good sign.





FULL THROTTLE 1995

DIRECTOR, WRITER, DESIGNER

Dave would eventually go off and join Ron at Humongous Entertainment, and I had that blank page problem of what do I do next? I pitched a bunch of games – I had a pitch document of about five different games. There was a sequel to *Monkey Island* and a sequel to *Day Of The Tentacle*, because they asked for that, and I did a day of the dead pitch, a spy game and a biker game. They were like, "Do you want to make any of these? Which one do you want to make? Commit to something!" I was like, "Okay, the biker game." They were worried that it would be too much about killing people and selling drugs, and I was like, "No! Of course not", because I didn't know anything about real bikers really. But I had read Hunter S Thompson books about it, and watched a lot of movies, and I wanted to do a story about a different kind of character than we had done before. We had done these loveable losers like Guybrush or Bernard Bernoulli, and it was like, "What about if it was someone who is cooler and tougher than you are? Would that be fun to control and drive around?" So that was a whole different vision for Ben [the game's lead character].



GRIM FANDANGO 1998

DIRECTOR, WRITER, PROGRAMMER

That one sat around for a little while as just 'the day of the dead game', and someone was finally like, "What are you going to do with this day of the dead game? It's a about a skeleton that does… what?" I just happened to have been watching a ton of film noir movies at the time, and I love Humphrey Bogart. There were all these interesting stories in my research, reading up a lot about Mexican folklore and the idea that when you go to the land of the dead they would put bags of gold on your coffin and on your chest to spend in the land of the dead, which is like, "Do you really need money when you're dead?" They would also put gold in the lining of the coffin to hide it from grave robbers, but also from dishonest souls in the land of the dead who might rob it from you. Just the idea that you had to worry about such trivial, petty crimes when you're dead seemed so crazy, but also really fun too. So that's where *Grim Fandango* came from.



DOUBLE FINE THE PUBLISHER

The family keeps getting bigger

As Double Fine looked to expand its horizons and try making games with smaller teams, the question of what the company stood for was raised. "Back then we picked personality and charm and a labour of love, that these things had to have a feeling that someone really put their heart and soul into them; that's what makes them Double Fine," founder and creative director Tim Schafer tells us.

And it's that criteria that has drawn them to their releases so far. "I think you can see with the Double Fine Presents games, which are selected by Greg [Rice], the question of a Double Fine game being about personality, charm and a labour of love are still true for those games too." Here are some highlights so far.



140

2016

This minimalistic platformer had already been released on PC, but Double Fine picked it up to release it for consoles. Developed by Jeppe Carlsen, who worked as gameplay director on *Limbo*, it is a thoroughly engrossing and colourful experience, with synchronised music mixing well with the gameplay.



EVERYTHING

2017

From the creator of *Mountain* (also supported by Double Fine) David OReilly, *Everything* is a wonderfully trippy exploration of the connection between all living things as you zoom in and out of objects from a galactic view to the atomic level and everything in-between.

PSYCHONAUTS 2005

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, WRITER, DESIGNER

I always wanted to make a spy game because I really liked *Three Days Of The Condor*, the Robert Redford movie. Then it kind of morphed into a space-spy game, and it was going to be this crazy mix of *Shaft* and *2001* that I always wanted to do. But after trying to get that made for a year, I started to have the revelation that one, I wanted to start to own what I made, and secondly, I wanted to have flexibility with the team and the culture of the team, and build that to be more representative of what I saw in my own *Grim Fandango* team. At a larger company you can't control the culture and the priorities of it and be flexible with employees if they want to work three days a week and stuff like that, so I wanted to set up something new. So we left with a couple of people from the programming team, and started Double Fine.

Some elements of the Spy game were like going into your own mind as a kind of meditation. You would meditate on an object in order to find a clue about it, and you would go into your mind to find all of these different things. Then someone was like, "Tell me about that game where you go into other people's minds", and I was like, "No, you go into your own mind… but wait a second! That's so much better" [laughs]. So sometimes creativity comes from misunderstandings.

I took it around to everybody, and luckily for me the Xbox had just launched, and they wanted to push games as something new. Ed Fries (Microsoft's VP of games at the time) would talk about games as art a lot, which is something that I thought was really important, and we hit it off and signed that game with Microsoft. Then he left Microsoft, and they cancelled all of his games. That was unfortunate for us, and kind of our lowest point. I at one point had a talk with the team that the next pay cheque was the last one, and that they could use our computers to put their resumes together, and then Majesco picked us up and signed us, and we got to finish the game.

The team was so dedicated, we believed in what we were making so much, and we had fought so hard just for the right for it to exist. The team crunched really hard, it was amazing because nobody quit, and it was a really horrible crunch. We decided to never crunch again, so we try not to. But we were really happy with the game, and we loved the game when it came out, and obviously we're making a sequel to it now. There's something about that world that we like and players like.







BRÜTAL LEGEND 2009

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, WRITER

I always thought of these games like *Neverwinter Nights* that we were up against were these really high fantasy things that we don't want to make, but if I were to make one I would want it to be more extreme than all of those. What's an even more *Neverwinter Nights* name than *Neverwinter Nights*? We can get more and more ridiculous, and eventually it came to me, sitting on a bus, driving through Marin: *Brütal Legend*. And I felt, "Yes, that's the most extreme fantasy name I can think of."

Then I also had a secret love for RTS games, especially the first Warcraft and *Herzog Zwei* before that, which was a Sega Genesis game. People said you couldn't do a RTS on consoles because of cursors being annoying to push around with a thumb stick, like in *Starcraft 64*. But in *Herzog Zwei* your avatar is your cursor, your little jet is your cursor, and I thought that was a natural thing to do. Also, the story I thought would be a screenplay about a roadie going back in time to King Arthur's court and using his roadie skills to do medieval combat using Duct tape and all that stuff. The two ideas bumped in my head, and I thought the roadie could be a heavy metal roadie, and the heavy metal imagery overlaps with these demon hotrods I wanted to make. I forgot to mention the RTS game I wanted to make was all about demons and hotrods, like Big Daddy Roth.

That title, story and gameplay mechanic all just crashed together, I got to make this dream game that I had been wanting to make for years, and got so much support from first Vivendi and then EA. It was a dream come true, as I got to meet Ozzy Osbourne, and I even got to meet Lemmy, Rob Halfrod, Dio and all those people who were my idols, and I got to put all of that music in the game and implement all of these videos I had seen in my head as I was driving my car listening to metal.

If I had infinite money, one of the things I would love to do is just hang out in that world and make more content for it. Just keep making missions for it, and make more multiplayer modes and stuff like that.



GNOG

2016

This fantastic puzzler works as well on a smartphone as it does in VR as you manipulate monster heads in order to solve their puzzle. It feels very much in keeping with some of Double Fine's Kinect-related work, breaking down the barriers to entry for players for a purer experience.



GANG BEASTS

2017

Another wonderfully simple but utterly engrossing experience, *Gang Beasts* manages to make brutal hand to hand combat into something totally hilarious as simple grabbing controls dictate the state of play. Can you hang on long enough to be the last fighter standing?



OOBLETS

TBC

Still in production and very much on our watch list, *Ooblets* is of course a glorious mix of *Pikmin*, Pokémon, *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon* as you gather up creatures in a new town, farm and customise both your home and character clothing. It's almost painfully cute, and we love it.



KNIGHTS AND BIKES

TBC

We dove deep into this fantastic RPG with the Foam Sword team recently, inspired by the likes of *Earthbound* and *Secret Of Mana*. Play as two young girls on a small island as their imaginations take flight and they head out on a big adventure. It's another game we can't wait to play more.





HOST MASTER AND THE CONQUEST OF HUMOR 2009

WRITER

We had a bunch of the comic-book artists here at the time; Scott Campbell, Nathan Stapley, Raz [Razmig Mavlian] and Tasha [Harris]. We had a web developer at the time named Klint Honeychurch, who could whip those things out, and it was awesome. I feel like *Host Master And The Conquest Of Humor*, which was something that I did because I was having writer's block writing my jokes for hosting the awards at GDC, that experience of making an adventure game started that germination of an idea that turned out to be *Broken Age*. I think just revisiting it, I had kind of written off adventure games because no one wanted to make them anymore, and I didn't want to make anything that's scripted like that anymore. Everyone was pushing for more system-based games. But I was like, "It's kind of fun to think about puzzles and think of pointing and clicking."



COSTUME QUEST 2010

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, WRITER

That's where we split from being a company that makes one 60-person game to four 15-person games. In some ways I saw the writing on the wall. We were so lucky to get the money that we got for *Brütal Legend*, but $20 million games that have original IP and they're kind of wacky, I thought the time was done for those on the publisher side. And if we did get that kind of deal, the terms of it would be horrible, like we would lose our IP, and if we wanted to do something creative we needed to risk smaller budgets, so we switched the smaller budgets.

So when Tasha, who came from Pixar as an animator, had this idea about costumed kids on Halloween transforming into powerful warriors based on their costumes, I loved it, and we did it as a game jam called the Amnesia Fortnight, where you have two weeks to make a game, and it gave Tasha the chance to make anything you want in two weeks with a team. She made *Costume Quest*, and Lee made *Stacking* off of that, which was the next game.







STACKING 2011

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

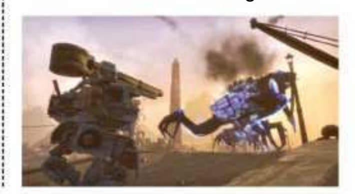
It was a brilliant game. I still love it. Lee Petty, who was the art director on *Brütal*, had a really unique vision for that game, and put an amazing art style together. It's still really unusual to this day to play that and see some of the things he did. The trick to that game is not just solving every puzzle once, but seeing how you can solve it five different ways.



IRON BRIGADE 2011

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, WRITER

That was Brad Muir, and that was an interesting experiment for us, really. What if we did a game that didn't start with story, as so many of our games start with world and story and character, but we start purely with mechanics, as that was more what Brad's style was. And that was fine, because we made a game that was all about mechanics, and then I came in and laid in the story on top of it, like "What's a good story that would make all of these giant mechs make sense?" That was a fun game to do. I think that's how a lot of professional writers in the game industry work: "The game is already done, could you come in and write the dialogue?"



SESAME STREET: ONCE UPON A MONSTER 2011

CREATIVE DIRECTOR



That's an example of how now that we're doing four projects at once, we can take risks and do things that we normally wouldn't do. Do a mechanics-first game, do an RPG, and then do a licensed project.

I remember I got to visit Henson studios and I got to touch Cookie Monster. I asked, "How many Cookie Monsters have there been? Like, 50 over time?" and they said, "No, there have been two." Only two Cookie Monster puppets, and this is one of them, and I was touching it. I got very emotional because of my childhood, and this was a childhood friend. It felt like meeting Ozzy Osbourne.

DOUBLE FINE HAPPY ACTION THEATER 2012

DIRECTOR



This is my surprise answer when people ask what game I am most proud of. That's the way I feel, because that and *Kinect Party*, which was the sequel to it because if you've ever seen someone play that game or you play it in person, to this day I keep my Xbox 360 in my living room, because when my daughter has a birthday party we turn it on, and I have never seen a room full of happier people playing a videogame. Two-year olds, grandma, everyone is just jumping up and down, yelling, screaming, throwing fireballs, and knocking at pigeons and playing in the ball pit and shooting lasers, without any sort of interface or instructions or any sort of explanation. We really had a dream for what that game would be like, and it really worked. Most of the time when people enjoy your game it's like, "Hmm, hmm." [chuckles] To be able to see people screaming their heads of as they play your game is like, "Wow! We've never made this much happiness in my life." That's so nice.

MIDDLE MANAGER OF JUSTICE 2012

CREATIVE DIRECTOR



Our foray into free-to-play. Our big experiment in free-to-play. That was Kee Chi, who had been at the company for about 17 years and ran that game, it had a really great art style and lore. We started with monetisation. One of the things we found out about our creative culture at the company was it was not set up to monetise [laughs]. This was right when Zynga was king and talking about 'pinching the player' and wilting their crops and all of these things, it just didn't fit. Usually when someone would say something doesn't fit with our DNA, I would say, "We don't have DNA! We do whatever game we want." But that was our experience that maybe didn't fit with our DNA. It was a really fun game, but it made us feel that we didn't want to do free-to-play anymore.

THE CAVE 2013

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Ron and I were talking about projects that he could do, and he told me this idea about three people going down into a cave and jumping back and forth between the different characters, and I thought it sounded great. So he came on and made that game for Sega, and my daughter really loves that game. It's a fun co-op game. He just made that one game and went back to his mysterious life of adventure gaming.





SPACEBASE DF-9 2013

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

That was another foray into something different, but we tried free-to-play, so thought, "Let's try early access", as we'd never done that. JP LeBreton was working on *Broken Age*, because we had started *Broken Age* by this point, and he had a dream of making something like *Dwarf Fortress*, but in space. It was a small team, we put that out in early access, and there was an initial burst of enthusiasm for it. Then they kept working on it for another year in early access, and when it felt like it had run its course with fans, we ended production on that. There was a huge backlash on that. It was right in the middle of Gamergate, and it was hard to separate for us the fans' honest reaction from people who were exploiting that moment to discredit us. *Psychonauts* being cancelled was our darkest time with publishers, and that was our darkest time with the community. We had honestly messed up the messaging on that game, and gave people different expectations than we wanted to. If we were to do it over again, we would message it a lot differently.



TIM SCHAFER'S OTHER CREDITS

The Double Fine founder made his name elsewhere too



STAR WARS: SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE/EPISODE 1 RACER/ 1996/1999

NEVER ACTIVELY TRIED TO SABOTAGE THE PROJECT

That was something more about the camaraderie of LucasArts in those days. We had people making the adventure games and the original IP and then we had people making the Star Wars games right in the next room. *Jedi Knight* was being made right next to us, *Pod Racer* was being made right next to us. So we were friends with them hanging out in the office, and I was like, "Guys, you have to give me a credit in your game." And they were like "What!? You didn't do anything in this game." And I said, "Yeah, but I never actually tried to sabotage it, so I didn't do nothing." I didn't do anything bad. I didn't do a thing to help, but I didn't do anything to hurt, and that deserves recognition. Because I could have.





HAUNT 2012

VOICE ACTOR

I had hosted the Choice Awards at GDC. I was up there acting like a smartass, and Masaya Matsuura – who made *Parappa The Rapper*, which was a big influence on me – was out in the audience. He was sat there with his producer, and they were like, "We have this character in our game, *Haunt*, who is supposed to be kind of funny, but also kind of shady and not trustworthy." [laughs] I didn't know where they got that from, but they came up and talked to me about it, and asked if I wanted to do a voice for *Haunt*, and I told them, "I can't act, you guys." They said, "Come on, do it", and so I did it. I did my best, and you can't judge how your own voice sounds because I'm not a professional actor, so I just put everything I could into that. I don't know if people saw it or heard it, but it was fun to do. It was a fun game, and they were great people to work with, so no regrets.



BROKEN AGE 2015

DIRECTOR, WRITER, DESIGNER

I had an email from someone trying to get me to do a Kickstarter back in 2011 or 2010, and I was like, "What's Kickstarter?"And a business guy at the time was like, "You can get about $5,000 for that, max." So we didn't do it. Then our documentary crew – or rather now it's our documentary crew – but back then it was these guys called 2 Player Productions, who had made a *Minecraft* documentary. They had thought they wanted to go deeper into development earlier on and do another documentary and crowdfund it, and we thought we should probably crowdfund the game too, otherwise a publisher would say, "You can't tell that story." Most documentaries or making-ofs are marketing materials. They're trying to sell the game, so they don't want to hear about, "Oh, we cut that feature?" or that these two people fought on the game; the dark side of game development that every game has. So we did a Kickstarter, and it exploded. It was really nice to get all of that money, but it was really nice to get all of that love. We had just released *Once Upon A Monster*, and they had just cancelled the sequel, *Twice Upon A Monster*, and they weren't happy with sales, so they cancelled it.

So having just this surprise party for us from all of these people telling us they loved us and they wanted us to do this thing was just a big lift, and it got us started on a game, which then once I designed it, I was like, "Oh, this is even bigger than the money that we got." But we were now making money because we had just self-published with an angel investor ports to the PC of *Costume Quest*. We started making our own revenue, and we put that all into *Broken Age*. But we didn't announce as the game was running late, and we got a huge backlash of emails, also during Gamergate, and it was also very convoluted.

People had a lot of different expectations back then about crowdfunding. When we first announced the plot for *Broken Age* some people were like, "Wait, I thought that we were going to help decide what the plot was." And a lot of people thought it was a pre-order service, that the game would be done really soon. So I think with a lot of that, people have learned what crowdfunding really is, which is supporting a creative project you believe in, and there's some risk associated with that, for sure. Anyway, we doubled the size of the game, and we documented the whole thing. We made the game, and I love the game and the documentary, some people site it as hugely inspirational for them. As a game developer it helps them see that other game developers struggle with the same things that they do, and seeing how the team creatively worked with each other.





MASSIVE CHALICE 2015

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Kind of a follow-up to *Iron Brigade* – another mechanics-first game. It had a really interesting idea about inheritance. It was not my style of game to play or make, it was very much Brad [Muir]'s style, but I think we also tried to make it a Double Fine game, and make it feel unique and have some humour to it. It's a very well respected game, and the fans are almost different from our regular community, because it's so tactical. There are people who play that game and love that game who have no idea what *Monkey Island* is, [laughs] and that's great.





GRIM FANDANGO REMASTERED 2015

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

That was a huge one. LucasArts was sold to Disney, we didn't know what would happen with the change of management, and it turned out we found some fans of the old adventure games at Disney, and they wanted to talk about it. What remained of LucasArts wanted to talk about it, and Sony got involved, and it seemed like this perfect storm of people who liked *Grim Fandango* who came together and said, "Yeah, let's do this."

We had to find a guy who collected old hardware to read all of these old tapes, and he was like, "This is probably the last time this drive is going to be readable." But because we could find the uncompressed DAT recordings of the voice, uncompressed recordings of the music, and just going back to uncompressed source material was such a relief, because we had to cram stuff on to even fit on CD-ROM back then.

It was great to do things for the players. Like, people make fun of the tank controls in *Grim Fandango* a lot, and it's kind of like looking at old pictures of my mum from the Seventies wearing striped bellbottoms, and she's like, "That was very popular at the time." That's always my explanation for tank controls: it was very popular at the time. You ever heard of *Tomb Raider*? *Resident Evil*? All of those games used tank controls because navigating through 3D space with a character was new to us, and then *Super Mario 64* came out and it was,"Oh, you push in the direction that you want to go? Oh, yeah!"

So anyway, on the remaster we were able to do things like add the choice of having tank controls, and you'll still get an achievement for it, but you also get point-and-click controls, and you never had that in *Grim Fandango*. It was nice to be able to do that too. So all round, an amazing opportunity. And we sold more copies of that than we did of the first game.





DAY OF THE TENTACLE REMASTERED 2016

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

That voice had been compressed to 8-bit, and when he says the letter S you can just hear the compression artefacts and stuff. That was horrible. But I got to hang out with Dave Grossman again, and it was the same thing: a reunion with the whole team and repainting that whole thing. Then we got more into adding features where they could have any combination of features, like the old graphics with the new controls or the new sound effects. They could mix and match whatever kind of game they wanted.



PSYCHONAUTS IN THE RHOMBUS OF RUIN 2017

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, WRITER

We wanted to make a VR game, and we were going into such unknown waters we were like, "Let's go in there with a friend, let's go in there with Raz." It seemed like a natural thing if we're going into the human mind and being surrounded by crazy visuals we could be in VR. But I get super sick in VR if I move at all, and so we made this game where you're tied to a chair, but it turned out to be a point-and-click adventure by the time we were done. You're pointing with your face, but you're looking around and solving puzzles.

We had Richard Horvitz, Nicki Rapp, Alexis Lezin, Stephen Stanton, Nick Jameson and all of the people who were in the original cast, and it was right during the crowdfunding campaign for *Psychonauts 2*. To be launching the campaign and be in the studio in LA with Richard Horvitz and be talking to him about Raz and Sasha and Millo, we were just immediately back in this world. It was fun to feel like this was something that had just been kept alive in my head, and I can just go back into this place and think about these characters again. That's how I knew *Psychonauts 2* would be okay.



PSYCHONAUTS 2 TBC

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DIRECTOR, WRITER

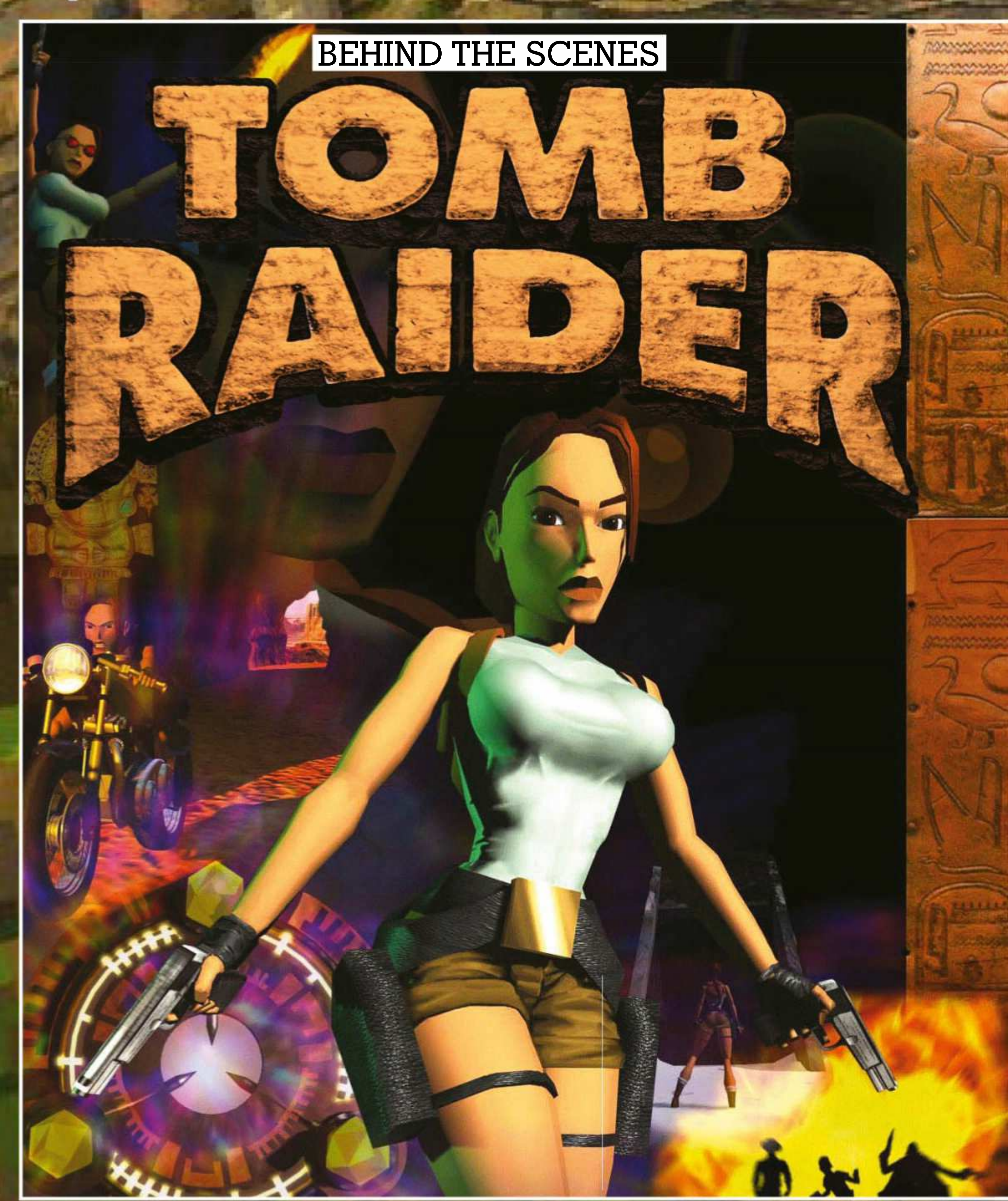
It was almost a self-fulfilling thing, because I said in an interview that I would like to make it, but I don't have the money. Then Notch tweeted that he would pay for it, and that didn't end up working out, but it started that weird feeling in my head of, "We could make it." We kept seeing if anyone else wanted to, and had an idea of crowdfunding.

We're not into the story or anything, but we're doing project updates and showing people the team and some blurred-out pictures of the thing. I'm excited about that, because we're trying to have all of the things that made the first game special, but also really tune up the mechanics and the platforming to make it really tight gameplay wise. It's also just really fun to see the characters looking beautiful.



MORE FROM DOUBLE FINE

- EPIC SAGA: EXTREME FIGHTER, BROWSER [2007]
- MY GAME ABOUT ME: OLYMPIC CHALLENGE. BROWSER [2008]
- TASHA'A GAME, BROWSER [2008]
- KINECT PARTY, XBOX 360 [2012]
- AMNESIA FORTNIGHT 2012, PC [2012]
- HOST MASTER DEUX: QUEST FOR IDENTITY, BROWSER [2013]
- DROPCHORD, PC, MOBILE [2013]
- AUTONOMOUS, PC [2013]
- THE PLAYROOM: MY ALIEN BUDDY, PS4 [2013]
- HACK 'N' SLASH, PC [2014]
- COSTUME QUEST 2, VARIOUS, [2014]
- AMNESIA FORTNIGHT 2014, PC [2014]
- DAY OF THE TENTACLE REMASTERED, VARIOUS, [2016]
- HEADLANDER, VARIOUS [2016]
- FULL THROTTLE REMASTERED, VARIOUS [2017]
- AMNESIA FORTNIGHT 2017, PC [2017]


BEHIND THE SCENES
TOMB RAIDER

Tomb Raider plunged Lara Croft into a deep waters and cavernous tombs, and allowed gamers to explore a full 360-degree 3D environment. A star was born…

Released: 1996
Format: Sega Saturn, PlayStation, DOS
Publisher: Eidos Interactive
Key Staff: Toby Gard (designer), Gavin Rummery (programmer), Paul Douglas (programmer), Heather Gibson (graphic artist), Neal Boyd (graphic artist), Nathan McCree (music)



GAVIN RUMMERY WAS SITTING ON THE STAIRS WITHIN THE MAZE OF CORE DESIGN'S HEADQUARTERS WHEN HE SUDDENLY REALISED THE GARGANTUAN TASK THAT LAY IN THE WEEKS, MONTHS OR PERHAPS YEARS AHEAD. Next to him was Toby Gard, a 23-year-old who was, at that point, best known for his work as a graphic artist on the kart racing game *BC Racers* which starred characters from Core's Chuck Rock series.

"It was my first day and I was told there were two potential games I could work on," Rummery recalls. "Toby enthusiastically described his vision of one of those games to me, which was more like someone describing a movie pitch than a game design that was possible in 1995.

"I honestly wondered how this young animator had persuaded anyone to let him try to make this thing, but as the new boy I just nodded and smiled whilst inwardly wondering how any of it could be made to work." That game was *Tomb Raider* and what Gard had described was like nothing else. It was also about to turn Core Design from a loosely organised group of mainly former Gremlin Graphics employees into one of the biggest and richest developers on the planet.

I HONESTLY WONDERED HOW THIS YOUNG ANIMATOR HAD PERSUADED ANYONE TO LET HIM TRY TO MAKE THIS THING

By the time Gard found himself explaining the concept to Rummery, he had already spent many months developing the game's lead character. As a huge fan of blockbuster action movies such as *Tank Girl* and Indiana Jones, he wanted the hero to be athletic, adventurous and smart. The character was originally going to be a man, and Core had already dabbled with such a figure in its Rick Dangerous series. But the makers feared the might of Hollywood because it was looking too close to Indiana Jones – there was even a whip used to climb and lasso things. Jeremy Heath-Smith didn't fancy taking on LucasArts so the character was switched to a woman and she was named Lara Cruz.

Lara came to life via pencils and paper, Gard's preferred method of designing. He scanned those that he liked and added colour, but it was a slow process, with lots of drawings hitting the bin before he hit upon the ideal image. Some of the physical attributes were deliberate: Lara's exaggerated figure made for a more recognisable character, Gard argued, telling the BBC "caricature can often communicate an idea faster and more clearly than a realistic representation can." Yet he told *The Face*, her figure was a "slip of the mouse". "I wanted to expand them 50 per cent and then – whoops, 150 percent. Darn," he added.

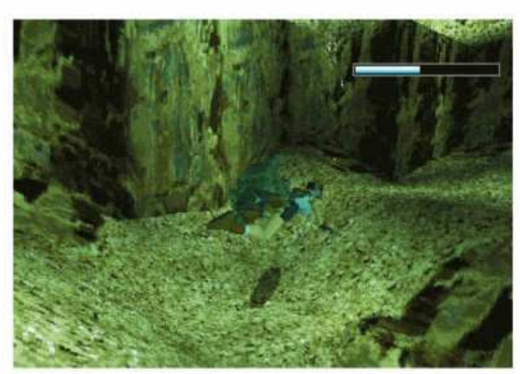
Gard suggested Lara was a "caricature of a feisty attractive woman" and so the facts eventually poured forth: 5ft 9in tall, nine stone, blood type AB negative, born on 14 February 1967 (Valentine's Day, of course). She was also an educated adventurer, albeit from a wealthy upper-class English family. A former pupil at Gordonstoun in Scotland and the product of a Swiss finishing school, Lara was also said to be fluent in a dozen languages. Her aristocratic background led to Lara's surname becoming Croft.

"My first impression was that I liked her," says graphic artist Neal Boyd. "She was not very butch, not overly sexy, just a normal-looking sassy adventurous female character. At this early stage in production, the thought of developing her to be highly sexualised in design was far from my thoughts. It was something that evolved over time with the popularity of the franchise and exploited by media coverage, which was something the team had no control over."

Gamers became acquainted with Lara during an introduction to Croft Manor that was created by Peter



The levels were varied, with some of them proving to be very colourful and light, ensuring surprises around many a corner.



CREATING LARA CROFT

HOW GAMING'S MOST RECOGNISABLE HEROINE CAME TO LIFE

HER HAIR

Initially, the idea was to give Lara Croft a ponytail within the game but the coders who worked on the original did not know how to create it. "For that reason, it became a 'bun'," says Gavin Rummery, and it was only in the sequel that I had a brainwave and figured how to do it. It was only possible to get it working after a little experimentation."

HER EYES

Those piercing brown eyes were originally to have been hidden behind sunglasses during the game (although we suspect that would have made it hard to see in those dark tombs). She did sport sunglasses in the first FMV of the game. "But, in-game, it just made her look like she had two black eyes so that was changed," Rummery explains.

HER CLOTHES

Toby Gard went through a number of iterations of Lara Croft as he put pencil to paper. At one point he had her wearing military-style clothing but felt that it made the character look too much like a Nazi. Lara also wore baggy trousers and crop tops for a while, which Gard said made her look like Neneh Cherry. Eventually the turquoise tank top and brown shorts won.

HER BODY

Given Lara was going to be leaping around tombs and hanging off ledges, she had to be fit. "She was always intended to be attractive and shall we say 'athletic'," says Stuart Atkinson. "But her personality was also very important, we all wanted her to come across as intelligent and well educated, and her aristocratic Englishness was all part of what made her not just eye candy but a character you could believe in."

HER CHANGING LOOKS

Lara Croft has evolved over the years, with the 2013 reboot introducing a reimagined character for a modern audience. Even in this image – taken from the 2007 remake of the first game, *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* – Lara appears toned down in some respects.

Barnard. "We wanted to set the scene for the interior of Croft Manor in the training level and show that it was a safe place," he explains. "It was an establishing shot to tease a bit more of Lara's backstory and the world she lived in. I also wanted to help players believe there was something beyond the walls of the training area so I made a point of showing the glass roof of the pool to hopefully connect the interior and exterior."

For the rest of the team, however, the biggest concern was the game itself. "I was very aware that Toby's idea was crazy ambitious, and initially wasn't very confident we'd get very far before the idea was shelved, especially as the small team was so inexperienced," Rummery says. With *Tomb Raider* seeking to be a fluid, cinematic, 3D game played from a third-person perspective packed with puzzles and a large dollop of freedom to explore, his reservations were entirely well-placed. "But this time, it was my job to come up with solutions," Rummery adds.

The assembled team consisted of just six people and they worked from a ground floor room in Core's converted Victorian house on Ashbourne Road in Derby. Coder Paul Douglas had been one of the first to work with Gard, and graphic artist Heather Stevens (nee Gibson) joined early on too. Boyd worked alongside her on the graphics while Paul Douglas and Rummery toiled on the game logic. But it was not an easy start.

One of the issues was getting across what Gard wanted so he spent a while modelling a tomb in Autodesk's

There are lots of nasties to start blasting away at throughout the debut *Tomb Raider* game, including numerous wolves.



It's those pesky wolves once more, showing just how up-close they would get as you sought to shoot them down.

professional computer graphics program 3D Studio, which gave those assigned to work on the game more of a clue. Even then, implementation was hard going. "The original plan had been for Heather to build levels using 3D Studio, but she was struggling to use it because it wasn't designed for building game levels and it was very slow and cumbersome," says Rummery. "In addition, Paul and I had no idea how we were going to display such a huge model in game, or how we could make Lara interact with it."

Rummery came up with the idea of basing the environments on a grid. He'd seen this approach used for the maps in *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* on the PC. "It clicked for Toby as he realised he could define all of Lara's moves and animations around the grid distances, and Paul realised it would make Lara's interaction with the environment easier to code.

"I spent several months making the Room Editor, which allowed the entire game levels to be built, textured, lit and the puzzles set up. Heather and Boyd found it much easier to build complex environments using the tool and the fact it was relatively quick to make small adjustments, export the level and run around it in game, made experimenting a lot easier. It allowed the levels and puzzles to be refined on a 'how about if you could climb up there?' kind of basis."

I WOULD ADD FRESH IDEAS WHEN I HAD THE INSPIRATION – SOMETIMES GOING FOR A PEE AT 4AM

Suddenly, things were looking up. For each level, the team would get together to discuss ideas and make suggestions. This would form the basic scenario while locking down the location and any element of story progression. "I was then left to my own devices to research and initially draw the level designs, which I would iterate on during the course of the building process," says Boyd. "I would add fresh ideas as and when I had the inspiration – sometimes when I was going for a pee at four in the morning."

Boyd says that the key element in designing the levels was flow. "There needed to be a mixture of puzzles, combat, surprise and exploration along with those wow moments when the scenery took your breath away," he explains. "I tried to play the level over in my head before committing to constructing it, to see if the balance seemed right. I am also an avid gamer so I know what would annoy a player or leave them wondering, 'what the hell do I do now?'. But, I will be the first to put my hand up and say,



The 3D is just excellent, with superb water and lighting effects. And the vastness of the 15 levels begins to get apparent when you're tired and lost somewhere about a quarter through the game

C&VG, 1996



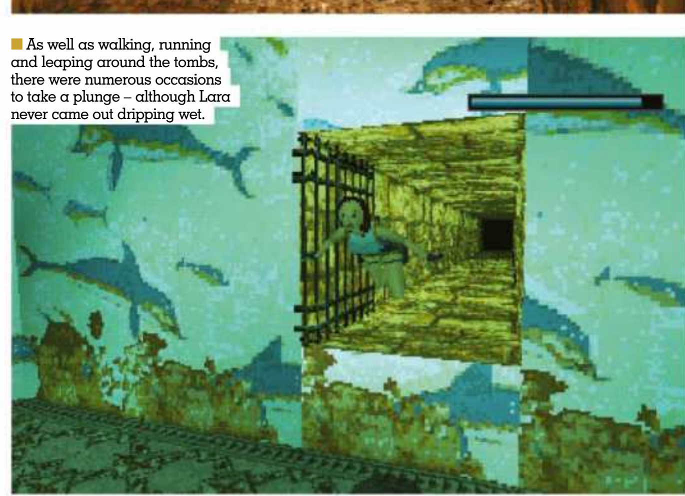
A spot of tense action in this cutscene helps to further the story and provide context for all of the tomb raiding ahead.





Perhaps the most Indiana Jones moment in the first game: the sight of the rolling boulder threatening to squish poor Lara got the heart pounding.

As well as walking, running and leaping around the tombs, there were numerous occasions to take a plunge – although Lara never came out dripping wet.





MEET LARA'S SUPERFAN

Ash Kapriyelov runs a comprehensive Tomb Raider fansite (tomb-of-ash.com)

WHY TOMB RAIDER?
Lara's character. She's brave, she's sassy and she explores places I'd longed to go myself. Getting lost in these immersive and complex levels was a comforting escape for me.

WHEN DID YOU BECOME A DEVOTEE?
Possibly late 2003, around the time I bought *The Angel of Darkness*. I started learning various software packages, notably 3ds Max, Photoshop and Premiere because I wanted to create some sort of fan-art.

WHY SET UP THE SITE?
When I moved to the UK in 2011 I was approached by a website called Lara Croft in Russia. It wanted to use some of my photos from various gaming events and my trips to Lara's metaphorical birthplace, Derby. Eventually, I decided to interview some of the ex-Core Design team members and created my site to share them.

WHAT'S YOUR AIM?
Our current aim is not only to uncover but also to preserve all of this obscure and enlightening ephemera and make it accessible to as many fans as possible. **Thanks to Ash for his help with this article.**



'yes, guilty your honour', on occasions, through a bad error of judgement."

Some puzzling mechanisms flowed throughout the game: there was a need to push blocks and avoid spike traps right the way through, for example. "There was also our homage to the rolling boulder, but my favourite puzzle was in the My Atlantis level, where you had to guide another Lara to her death as she mirrored your every move," Boyd continues. "I cannot take full credit for this as it was Toby's suggestion but the bastard left me to work out a possible solution, which took a while, I can tell you."

With the game starting to come together, enthusiasm for the project rocketed. "Once we started making progress with the environments and Lara running around, it became clear we had the basis of something pretty cool," Rummery says. "We were all surprised at the scale of the levels that Heather and Boyd started to build when they got into their stride – in fact, many were so big they ended up getting split into multiple levels to work on the PlayStation."

But the gigantic size of the levels only became apparent after the artists had finished beavering away in the Room Editor and the other team members were asked to give them a play test. "The scale of some of them was the main surprise for me, but Toby, who was first and foremost the character artist, would also surprise us by slipping in new moves for Lara that no one was expecting, such as the handstand," Rummery adds.

While the team worked, Heath-Smith let them get on with the task. Decisions and additions were made on the fly since there were no design documents, just Gard's guidance and an overall vision to go off of. The work, however, was gruelling and the developers would have to work incredibly long hours that extended into the night. Even when some of them got home, they would keep working, pulling out all of the stops to ensure that the game was as good as it could possibly be. In many ways, you could say that they didn't help themselves. "Toby worked himself into the ground – he was such a perfectionist and wanted a hand in everything to ensure it fitted his dream that he made himself ill for the final couple of weeks," Rummery says.

Gard's work extended to developing the script and story with writer Vicky Arnold. He also created an initial storyboard, which Barnard used in the creation of some of the game's cutscenes including the drama of the Imprisonment of Natla. "Many of the shots and lighting styles were chosen for the maximum dramatic impact as well as being quicker to produce," Barnard explains. "I also made the decision to not clearly show the faces of Tihocan and Qualopec as it made them feel more powerful and in charge of the situation. Making use of the strong silhouettes of the characters led to some quite stylish shots, which wouldn't have had the same impact if they'd been lit fully."

The work intensified when Heath-Smith popped into the office one day and told them a deal had been struck with Sega and that the game was not going to debut on the PlayStation as originally intended but on the Saturn. Jason Gosling was assigned the programming duties for that game but it had to be hurried along. "We weren't happy because it meant we would lose six weeks from

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Virtua Fighter > Tomb Raider > Uncharted: Drake's Fortune



Toby Gard was inspired by the characters of *Virtua Fighter* and he wanted to put them in a game like *Ultima Underworld*.



Tomb Raider has inspired similar games; the most successful is Uncharted – from which Lara has taken inspiration of her own.



the schedule when we only had five months to go, so it was a significant chunk of time to lose," recalls Rummery. "Jeremy asked if it was possible; we said no; he explained why it was a good thing, asked if it was possible; we said no. Rinse and repeat about three times – he won, and we worked our socks off to hit the new deadline."

It meant it was crunch time for the remainder of the project ("but it was nothing compared to what we experienced on *Tomb Raider II* trying to build a sequel in ten months," Rummery says). Still, there was time for some lovely additions. "My favourite moment is the T. rex – I had friends describe how they dropped the joypad in fright," Rummery laughs. "And it isn't scripted at all – it is just an AI that runs to get Lara like any other but it works because players trigger it when they are right out in the open and aren't expecting anything like that to appear."

Yet tiredness did set in, which had an effect on the gauntlet-like final level to a degree. It was the last level to be produced and Boyd says: "We were all burnt out with working long hours and suffering from sleep deprivation, so fresh ideas were not forthcoming. The only part I would change is the bit where Lara slides down that very boring and visually uninspiring triangular slope before exiting the pyramid. I wish I had the energy to just make something more spectacular as a fitting ending to the adventure but, the game had a deadline, and that was it."

Before they reached the end, however, the developers sought to give Lara a voice and personality, searching for three months to find a suitable actress. They eventually signed Shelley Blond who, after sending in a recording of a few lines from a script, was asked to audition over the phone on a conference call.

"I was asked to be very monotone in my speaking – to read lines without much emotion," she recalls. "I am very naturally emotive in my vocal expression and that was what I had to concentrate on; on making her voice very even." She says the team already had an idea of how she should sound which she fully understood. "It was their project and their 'baby' and I was there to do a job. I performed as I was directed," she says.

At the time, she saw the role as just a job and all she had to go off was a rough drawing of how Lara would look. Shelley was not a gamer and the fact she was going to voice a videogame character was of no interest to her – "I just wanted to perform my role as best I could," she says. But she defined Lara early on: "I think I injected a determined nature, a quick-witted personality and a real adventurer. Not someone to be messed with but still retaining a mystery somehow." It's only now that she sees how much *Tomb Raider* has affected people. "I don't think even Eidos and Core had a clue it would be as big as it became in the beginning."

If not, then they certainly did when *Tomb Raider* was first revealed at the European Computer Trade Show held at Olympia in London in April 1996. Model Natalie Cook was among those asked to pose as Lara to promote the game, and *PC Zone* magazine splashed her across the front of its Christmas issue later that year, firmly establishing her link with the character at that time. There was a high level of excitement over the four-stage, 15-level extravaganza and its suspense-laden plot. Critics loved exploring the Inca caves, Greek coliseums, Egyptian temples and an Atlantian pyramid as well as the blast-em-up action.

SHE WAS NOT VERY BUTCH, NOT OVERLY SEXY, JUST A NORMAL-LOOKING SASSY ADVENTUROUS FEMALE CHARACTER

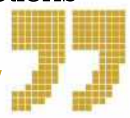
"The crunch was hard but it paid off and the game was a massive success," Rummery says. "But then it had everything lined up for it: 3D games and consoles were all new, and we created one of the first truly 3D third-person action-adventure experiences. Lara was the icing on the cake because she became such an iconic character in her own right and broke out into the mainstream consciousness (she's better known than the game). But ultimately the game played well and gave players something they'd not experienced before."

Released in time for Christmas, *Tomb Raider* went on to sell more than seven million copies and gaming magazines fell over themselves in praising it. The Saturn version did indeed come first and it proved to be a decent move for the game given that bugs emerged that were subsequently fixed for the PlayStation and DOS releases. As Rummery said, *Tomb Raider II* was then duly commissioned and it became a console exclusive for PlayStation, making Lara an unofficial mascot for Sony for a while. This sparked annual releases for the rest of the decade and a series that continues to this day, 22 glorious years on.

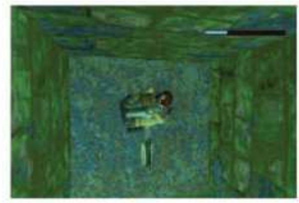


Remarkably, in spite of the complex range of motions, the game's control is easy and intuitive, consisting of only two or three buttons and the four directions

Next Generation, 1996





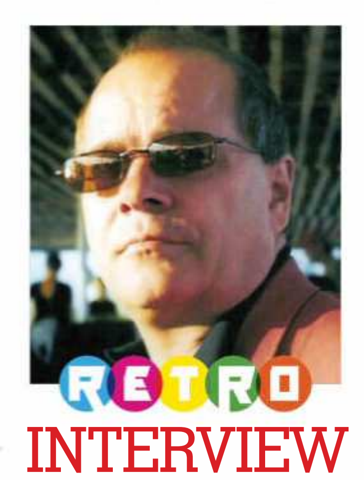






GETTING IT RIGHT

"Time is accelerating today: upgrades of Android- and Apple-software phones are very regular. But when we produced the CPC, the PCW and PCs, we never expected to produce any software upgrades. What you saw was what you got. We really had to concentrate on getting things right first time, and the discipline involved in that back then cannot be overestimated. We certainly could not send code to be burned on to ROM for the CPC 464 and go back a week later to say: 'Awfully sorry we have found a bug in it'."



INTERVIEW

ROLAND PERRY

Drafted in to rescue a failing plan to produce Amstrad's first computer, Roland Perry helped lay the foundations for the three-million selling CPC range

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Amstrad CPC 464
1984
Group Technology Consultant, Amstrad

Amstrad CPC
1984
Group Technology Consultant, Amstrad

GX4000
1990
Group Technical Manager, Amstrad

What prompted Amstrad's decision to make a computer?
I think it was the emergence of Apple II clones, which pointed towards an emerging computer market. Since Amstrad as a company was always looking to see what people wanted to buy, and with MSX a big thing at the time too, it seemed an obvious step to take.

Were you involved with the planned CPC 464 from the very beginning?
No, not at all. I came in very late in the day. At the time I was working for Ambit International [a component supplier and hardware design consultancy company] and Bob Watkins [Amstrad's technical and manufacturing director] approached us. Amstrad's original plan had involved a couple of guys who didn't really understand the enormity of the task, and by August 1983 the project was looking pretty flaky. What should have come to fruition by the end of the year in order to get it into the shops in 1984 had failed, so in order to get the project rejuvenated Amstrad needed to find someone mad enough to think they could pick up the entrails and do something useful with it in about three months. And that's what we did.

What kind of state was the computer in at that time?
It was completely rubbish. What we saw was the original project presented as a pre-prototype and we were asked if we could finish it off. We looked at it and said, 'absolutely not'. It was that bad. All we could try and do was start the project from scratch and ignore every industry precedent ever by throwing everything we had at it.

Did this involve working around the clock?
Oh yes. I'd managed to gather together a team of people who were professional designers of hardware and software of the 8-bit microprocessors and I ended up with two sets of sub-contractors who were working day and night. I worked from 8am to 10pm and it was very hard, but what we did was study the BBC Micro and look at what they did right and wrong, and we looked at the Commodore 64 and Spectrum and reviewed the lot. We thought about how we could somehow put together a bundle of all of the good bits and none of the bad bits.

THE 664 WAS NOT A BAD MACHINE; IT WAS A VICTIM OF A HISTORICAL ACCIDENT

What did you consider to be the good bits?
Well, things like screen resolution, the number of colours, the amount of memory and the processor. We wanted people to be able to port the Spectrum games to it easily and for it to have enough connectors that you could hook up everything that you might ever want, such as a joystick or a monitor and all that sort of stuff. It was important to have a BASIC that made sense rather than

something like BBC BASIC, which was so wacky and non-intuitive. It was a case of making things fall into place and we had a relatively clean slate. There was so much precedent of things which had been done right that we could build upon and things which had been done wrong that we could push aside.

Why did you decide to go with a cassette drive?

There was a price point for the computer and using a disc drive in those days would have doubled the price. The computer needed to be accessible to the general public and we felt they would be attracted by a machine for £199. We needed to get people interested in cassette drives first and then say, 'well you may now want to do all of these things a bit faster so if you have the money, then maybe use one with a disc drive in it.' We just felt that you can't go in on day one with something that's so expensive that nobody's buys it.

THE IDEA WAS TO MAKE SOMETHING THAT WAS A VIABLE COMPETITOR FOR THE COMMODORE 64

So was the idea always to create a range of machines?

Not originally, no. The idea was to make something that was a viable competitor for the Commodore 64 or the BBC Micro with a tape drive and half a dozen other things, but throwing in the monitor. The basic proposition was that you only had one TV in your house at that time and mum and dad want to watch *Coronation Street*. We didn't want the kids grabbing the TV to play video games so the computer had to come effectively with a TV set for free.

Amstrad's boss Alan Sugar always talked of the ease in setting the computer up, didn't he?

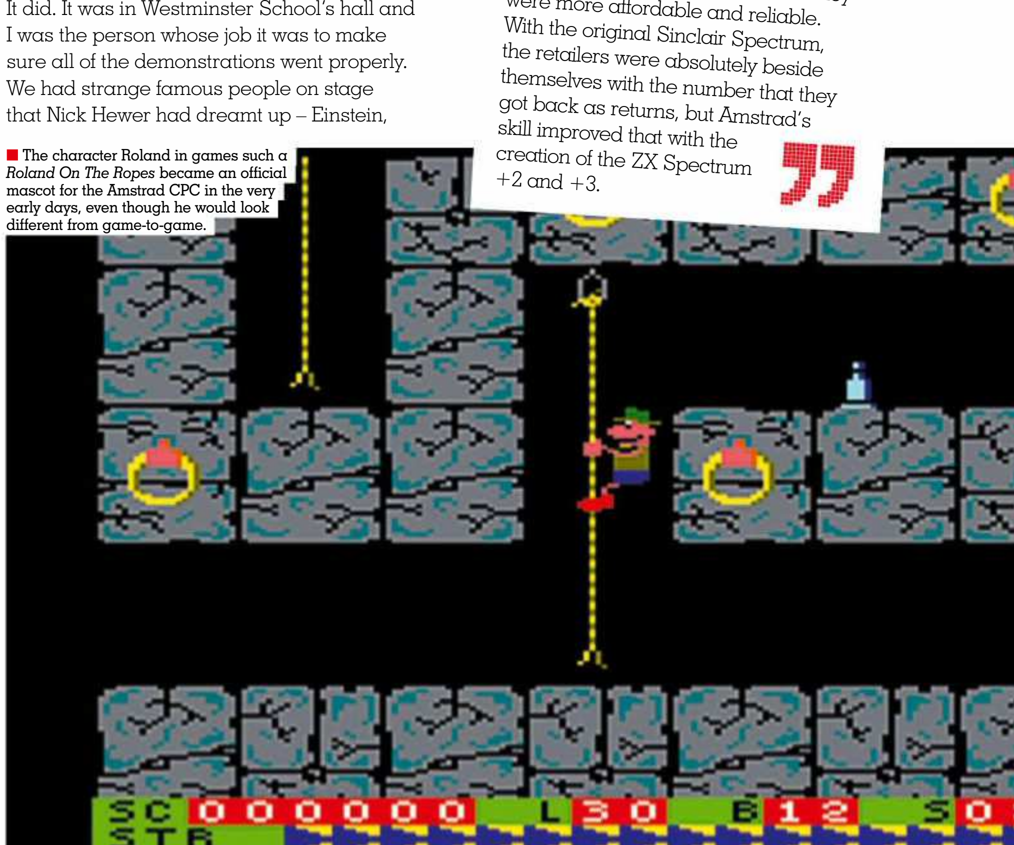
Well, we always thought that if a dad and his son bought one in Dixons on a rainy afternoon in Scunthorpe, then if mum asked what on Earth they'd spent the house money on, they could plonk it down and show it doing something within about ten minutes. I'm not being sexist there, it's just kind of a household budgeting thing. The point is that you need to get this instant gratification, and most of the competition didn't have that. There was such a steep learning curve in unpacking computers, plugging them in, switching them on and finding out how to do something. But we produced something that you connected to the monitor without grabbling around the back of it and just plugged in. Once you inserted the Welcome tape which I wrote and pressed play, then within five minutes it was doing something. It was not just a lump of complicated technology that you couldn't get your head around. In another five or ten minutes you were sitting there playing *Harrier Attack* or whatever.

Was it important to have games available from the start?

Yes. When the CPC 464 went into retail we had about 50 games available and that was important because it was part of the success and vision. You can't just launch a computer and say there will be lots of games along for it real soon – you had to produce the whole package. So you could not only buy the computer, tape deck and monitor all in one go, you could purchase a catalogue of games too. It meant that at one point in the project, myself and my team spent most of our time facilitating the development and translation of a sufficient number of games, and we'd distributed between 40 and 50 prototype computers to software companies. One of the very first games that was available at launch was *Roland in the Caves* which was a subterranean platform game. Sugar had this whizzo idea of naming the creature in it after me, so there ended up being this whole series of games like *Roland on the Ropes*, *Roland in Time* and so on.

Did the launch of the machine go well?

It did. It was in Westminster School's hall and I was the person whose job it was to make sure all of the demonstrations went properly. We had strange famous people on stage that Nick Hewer had dreamt up – Einstein,



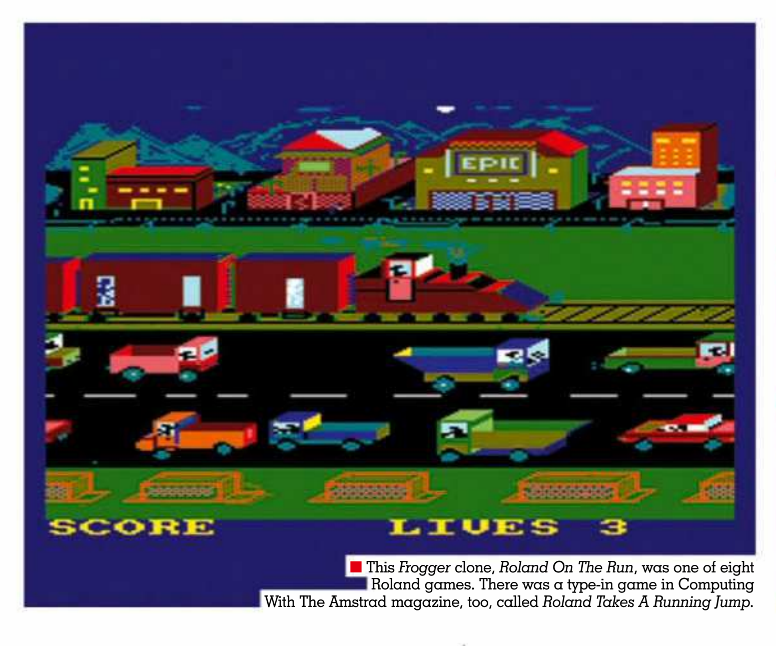
■ The character Roland in games such a *Roland On The Ropes* became an official mascot for the Amstrad CPC in the very early days, even though he would look different from game-to-game.





SINCLAIR'S SPECTRUM

"We never considered removing the Sinclair name from the Spectrum when we bought the company in 1986 for £5 million, but we did add the ability to production engineer them so that they were more affordable and reliable. With the original Sinclair Spectrum, the retailers were absolutely beside themselves with the number that they got back as returns, but Amstrad's skill improved that with the creation of the ZX Spectrum +2 and +3."



This *Frogger* clone, *Roland On The Run*, was one of eight Roland games. There was a type-in game in Computing With The Amstrad magazine, too, called *Roland Takes A Running Jump*.

The GX4000 showed great promise with games such as *Burnin' Rubber* but it just couldn't beat Nintendo and Sega.

Archimedes, William Shakespeare, Monet and Ravel – but what was also in plain sight was a pre-production prototype floppy drive add-on for the CPC 464 which we used to load the software for the demonstration. We did this because nobody would have waited long enough for the tape versions of them to load. They would have got bored and gone off somewhere. But it shows that we had worked on creating a disc drive at an early stage.

That development led to the release of the disc-based CPC 664, didn't it?

Well, the 664 has become a bit of a cause célèbre. Before we launched that, we produced and sold a disc drive for the 464, but we were inundated by people who said: 'For pity's sake, why don't you put a floppy drive in the 464 so we don't have to faff around with this external drive.' So we said, 'OK, since there is such an enormous demand, we'll do it,' and that's when the 664 was created. Meanwhile, and completely independent from all of that, the distributors in the foreign marketplaces we were selling into said they couldn't sell a 64k computer. They said it was too old, too low a number and that we had to produce a 128k computer.

Is that when the CPC 6128 was born?

Yes. A completely separate research and development production stream worked on the 6128, which is basically a 664 with 128k of memory. What happened next was the 664 came out, followed by the 6128 not terribly long after. We then thought that we may as well sell the 6128 in the UK which, with 30 years of hindsight, we maybe shouldn't have done for another six or nine months.

Is that because it made the 664 obsolete within months of its launch?

Well, no one in the UK knew there was a 6128 in America and other foreign markets because there was no such thing as the internet and social media, so it might have been better to have extended the life of the 664 rather than supersede it with the 6128 in the UK quite so quickly. Everybody would have been perfectly happy to buy several hundred thousand 664s to play their 464 games loaded on a disc drive. The 664 was not a bad machine; it was a victim of a historical accident really.

Ultimately, how involved was Lord Sugar in the range?

Very. People used to ask me whether I saw Alan Sugar very much. I did – loads. He was very close to the project, and one of the many reasons for Amstrad's success was that all of the protagonists were in touch with one another all of the time and everyone was on their toes. He was very approachable.

Did the CPC give Amstrad the confidence it needed in the computer marketplace?

If Amstrad had come up to us and said, 'can you do the CPC 464 in three months because we're going to sell five million of them', we would have run for cover. It'd have been too much responsibility. But two or three years later we had become normalised to the idea that the computers which Amstrad made would be lapped up, thanks to the company's powerful distribution channel and brand name. We were convinced the Amstrad PCW would do very well, and that proved to be the case.

Amstrad moved on to the PCW and a range of PCs but it did return to the CPC in 1990. Why was that?

We'd made the PC 1640 as a successor to the PC 1512 and people kept nagging us and saying, 'why don't you add games capability in the 1640?', 'put a CD drive inside it', and it was like 'who is going to want that? It won't be terribly good.' But in the meantime Nintendo and other companies of that type were producing dedicated games consoles and there were loads more people nagging us left, right and centre asking us to do something with our existing platforms to produce something vaguely competitive.

This led to the 464 Plus and 6128 Plus, which added extra colours, hardware sprites and a cartridge port. There was also a GX4000 console, wasn't there? But none of these did terribly well. Was it a mistake?

No. The GX4000 wasn't a mistake. I didn't think of it as 'one of my projects' because the cartridge element was mainly driven by the software marketing bit of Amsoft. But every now and then you have to give something a try and see what happens. In this case, I don't think any of them really got that much traction, but the latest machines were not loading off tape or disc, they were loading off a cartridge, and we felt if we didn't try this capability, then we would be behind the times. I do recall the launch in Paris, though, which was memorable on account of taking the press party out to dinner at the restaurant on the Eiffel Tower, and getting caught in a thunderstorm – the Tower itself and the plaza below are open to the elements.

Why do you think people still enjoy using their CPC computers today?

I think it's because we got it right first time. We put the right expansion ports on those computers and it meant that years and years later, peripherals which we hadn't thought about could be plugged in to the serial port or whatever port we had. That kind of upwards and forwards compatibility was a fundamental thing. The thing I'm nostalgic about with Amstrad today is how much of the stuff we said we'd try actually worked.

When pitching the game for a publisher Virgin Interactive said it would take it, but only if it was adapted into a point-and-click adventure

GAME CHANGERS

ANOTHER WORLD

Developer: Delphine Software **Publisher:** Delphine Software, US Gold, Interplay **Released:** 1991 **System:** Amiga, Atari ST

A cinematic world in an age before it became the vogue, a narrative-driven experience before story really mattered in games, we take a closer look at Eric Chahi's masterpiece

WE ASK DEVELOPERS a simple, but challenging question at the end of every interview: "Which game do you love and why do you love it?" It's the basis of our Why I Love spreads every issue and it's always a fun way to end a conversation. But, there are a handful of games that we can often predict will come up every few interviews and one of the most frequent and passionately supported is Eric Chahi's *Another World*.

We've always had a deep appreciation of *Another World* but, frankly, having so many developers tell us that it's a game they love has made us re-examine the Atari ST and Amiga release. Perhaps its most important contribution to the future of gaming was how cinematically minded it was. There's a sense of scene and place in the game unlike anything you would typically expect to find in an action adventure of this type. But this wasn't an interactive story with mild player participation. *Another World* is a fully featured, challenging and sometimes complex platformer and shooter. Its cinematic sensibility comes through its structuring and scene setting, rather than heavy-handed narrative or cut scenes. There's only enough story here to make sure you have motivation to move on to the next challenge and even then none of it is spoken or written in words you could understand.

PART OF THE REASON FOR THE GAME'S BREVITY IS THAT IT WAS A LARGELY IMPROVISED DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

One of the great examples of this movie inspiration is how Chahi used the different planes

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

HOW ERIC CHAHI MADE THE MOST OF THE TECH AT HIS DISPOSAL TO DRAW US INTO THE STORY



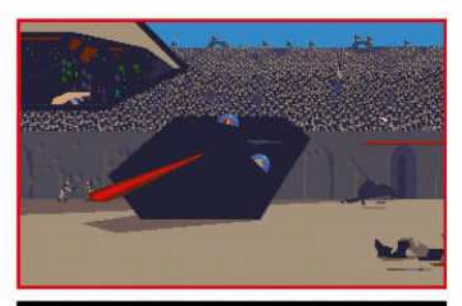
SUGGESTIVE OVER DESCRIPTIVE

★ *Another World* didn't have a huge colour palette it could draw from and thanks to using polygons for its models, there couldn't be a mass of detail either. So the beast at the beginning of the game is nothing but a hulking mass and a pair of red eyes, but with the right shape and movement, that's all that was needed.



GETTING UP CLOSE

★ Your companion through much of *Another World*, affectionately known as Buddy by players, gets a brief close-up shot when you meet him so you can see his face. Chahi did that so you had a sense of what he looked like from then on with the less-detailed model.



THE GREAT ESCAPE

★ The big escape sequence at the end of the game is pretty dramatic, but it's made all the more so thanks to the laser fire coming from the foreground and leaving holes in the walls in the background. They can't actually hurt you, but it ups the ante considerably.

of the 2D game to create depth. There are several sequences in which you see things moving in the background and foreground that help to establish this alien planet as a living place with action and entities all around you. You may only be able to move forward and backward, but the planet exists in 360 degrees.

And then it will play with you a little, giving you access to those planes of existence, such as sneaking behind a guard house when Buddy gets stopped by alien enforcers and taking them out from behind. Even something as simple as being able to walk up slopes and staircases that appear to be set behind your 2D plane added depth to the experience.

Structurally, also, *Another World* feels more like it's constructed into acts rather than into levels. The experience is continuous for a start, without level breaks or title cards, so you move from one area to the next, and often back and forth, without interruption. Each part of the game has its own feel and tone too as you search aimlessly and defenceless in the early stages of a strange and intimidating world, then you sneak and stealth your way around once you're armed and you close out the game in an all-out rush trying to escape. *Another World* was a game about story and experience, tone and mood, but not about scores, like so many games of its type from the era before.

In fact, *Another World* is completely without a HUD, which is pretty extraordinary even today. Not that it has a lot that it needs to tell you about exactly, but there's no map to the overworld, no indicator for your weapon when you finally get one and no health to speak of. *Another World* is incredibly challenging thanks to its single hit kill and threats all around you. Thankfully, the checkpointing was relatively generous so you wouldn't lose too much progress. And the game wasn't terribly long to play through either, which at the time of its release was a point of some criticism, but in the modern context seems relatively reasonable.

Part of the reason for the game's brevity is that it was a largely improvised development process for Chahi, who programmed and designed the game on his own for the most part. He has since explained that in many ways the structure of the game began to reflect his own personal experience as each chronological piece was built based on what he felt was the right direction to go in next. Lester Chaykin begins the game alone, much as Chahi was alone in development, then he meets Buddy and works with him as Chahi began to desire some companionship from the experience. Finally, Lester is exhausted, dragging himself to the final moments of the game, much as Chahi felt finishing the game working 16-hour days for the last three months of development to get it all done in time.

This freeform style of game-making goes some way to also explain why it took two years to make, something that today would sound pretty fast for a game these days. Chahi took the game where he thought it should go as and when he reached a new impasse, building up the pace and tension of the experience as he went.

So, where would we ultimately be without *Another World*? Well, the more cinematically-influenced games that would follow would have likely taken a little longer to come along, outside of adventure games at least. The quality of the animation achieved through rotoscoping wouldn't necessarily prove very influential, but the final quality of it was something many strived for through other animation techniques. We're not sure that the games of Playdead like *Limbo* and *Inside* would be what they are if Chahi's release hadn't come first. And, tonally, it was just more mature and considered than many games had attempted before and hit players in a way that many had never experienced. *Another World* showed that you could bring narrative, action, puzzling and drama to a game experience and still hand over most of the control to the player. That's something that should never be underestimated.

KEY FACTS

- Lester's hair was red because Chahi wanted to make sure he didn't look like the rotoscoped footage he had recorded of himself.
- A GBA version of the game, based on the Atari ST build, was produced, but canned. It was ultimately released as a freeware ROM with Chahi's blessing.
- The SNES release was lightly censored with the alien bums disguised in the bath house sequence.





GAME CHANGERS

LEGENDS OF THE ROTOSCOPE

EIGHT GAMES THAT EMBRACED THIS LITTLE-USED ANIMATION TECHNIQUE



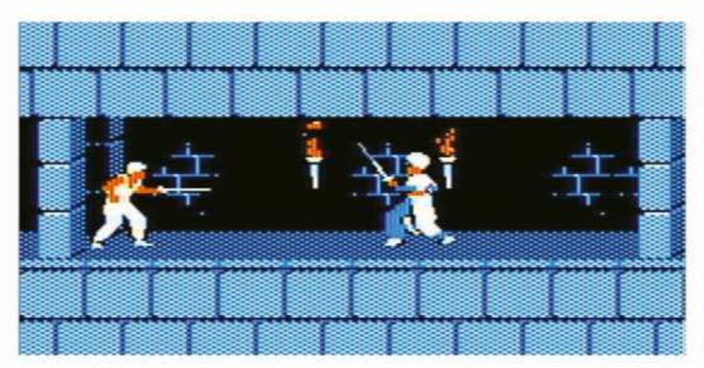
DRAGON'S LAIR (1983)

Like much of the Disney animation that inspired it, *Dragon's Lair* used a lot of rotoscoping techniques to make sure that the flow of movement was as close to human as possible, while still adding plenty of flair and style to the overall experience. As a largely animated experience, there were a lot more frames to fill than in your usual game experience of the time and that meant an even bigger challenge.



KARATEKA (1984)

An early fighting game and an early release from Jordan Mechner, whose work comes back to rotoscoped animation a few times as we'll see shortly. For *Karateka*, it was largely about making sure that all of the martial arts moves, performed by Mechner's karate instructor and then animated over the top. With only eight frames of animation the effect is particularly impressive.



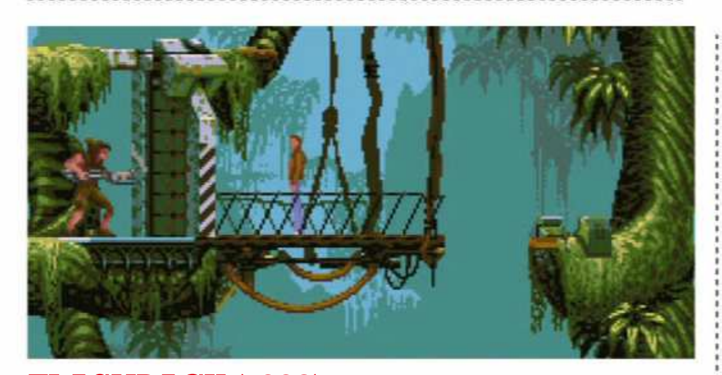
PRINCE OF PERSIA (1989)

Jordan Mechner was back and with an even more ambitious action experience in *Prince Of Persia*. Its use of rotoscoping to create the most realistic running and jumping animations possible (not to mention the climbing, which we've always rather liked) is probably one of the most famous examples of the form. Some of it was captured from videos of Mechner's brother as well as the movie *The Adventures Of Robin Hood*.



ANOTHER WORLD (1991)

Eric Chahi used rotoscoping largely in the small cutscenes of the game, such as recording the drifting of a toy car to create the scene of Lester arriving at his lab or recording himself walking away from camera to create a similar action for the lead character. The walking, running and jumping animations all carry a similar realistic feel to *Prince Of Persia* too. It helped give the experience a grounding against the fantastical backdrop Chahi had created.



FLASHBACK (1992)

Before *Another World* there was *Future Wars*, a game on which Eric Chahi was artist and Paul Cuisset was designer and while Chahi made his adventure, Cuisset worked on *Flashback*. And like Chahi, he moved towards rotoscoping to give his fantastic adventure some realistic feeling animations and grounding. The final game is actually an interesting middle-ground between the sci-fi world building of *Another World* and the action of *Prince Of Persia*.



THE LAST EXPRESS (1997)

Mechner turned to rotoscoping again and with fantastic effect for this adventure game inspired by Art Nouveau. A 22-day shoot was required with actors in full makeup and costume to help to capture every facet of movement and emotion for the game. Then a selection of frames were kept, desaturated, put through a line-drawing program and finally painted over. The final effect gives the whole game a very strange but engaging quality.



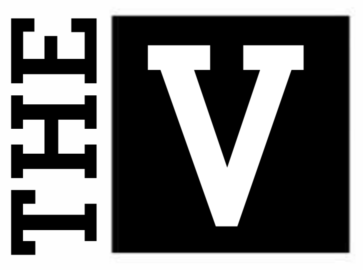
HOTEL DUSK: ROOM 215 (2007)

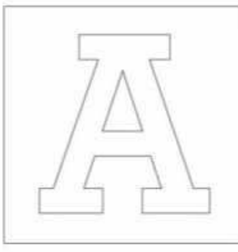
Ten years after *The Last Express* another adventure game finally came along and embraced rotoscoping for its animation, this time bringing a scratchy sketch aesthetic into the mix, which gave *Hotel Dusk* a unique feel. This was combined with 3D objects and more traditionally rendered backgrounds to give the whole game an interesting multimedia feel that combined nicely with the way it asked players to hold the DS like a book.

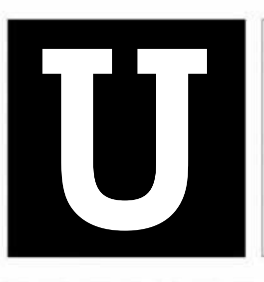


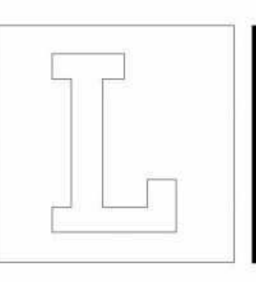
THE BANNER SAGA (2014)

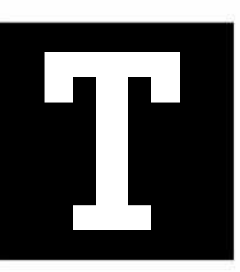
Probably our most recent example of really great implementation of rotoscoping, *The Banner Saga* created some wonderful transitional, attack and idling animations based on recordings. This gives every movement in the game a sense of weight, which plays brilliantly against the medieval setting and the weaponry being used. There's an additional brutality that comes from each blow thanks in large part to the style of animation employed.











Unfortunately, the keys on this miniature Commodore 64 don't work, but that's just us wanting to play around with the tiny keys. It's otherwise a fantastic take on the classic hardware.

While the joystick looks the part, it is unfortunately the biggest shortcoming of the C64 Mini experience. You're just not going to get the control feel you want from it, and it holds back everything else.

THE C64 MINI

MANUFACTURER: **GAMES LTD** PRICE: **£69.99**

Inspired by the success of Nintendo's Mini offerings, as well as the plug-and-play variants of a swathe of Eighties machines, The C64 Mini does a fairly decent job of presenting its games as accessibly as possible and in a mightily attractive package, but it's not without its faults.

First, the form factor is very appealing. These pint-sized consoles are instantly attention-grabbing and desirable. It's perhaps a shame that the keyboard on the C64 Mini is purely decorative, but hardly surprising. As it is, the diminutive machine is only a little larger than the SNES Mini and just as easy to get started with.

Like Nintendo's machines, it forgoes a power supply in the box in favour of a USB cable, connecting to a TV through HDMI and with two USB ports for its controllers (one joystick is provided in the box). The 64 games made available offer a pretty broad range, and are selectable in a rotating carousel, again similar to what you will have seen on similar products. It's a nice touch to see that each game comes with some preview images (just in case the interpretive box art of the time doesn't clear up what the game is supposed to be) along with a short description to get you up to speed as fast as possible.

Less clear is how to actually play most of the games unless you've experienced them before. Full digital instruction manuals can be found the C64 Mini's website, and you'll definitely want to have that available on a second screen if you're switching between titles.

The difficulties with the C64 Mini come in two core areas, though. First is the selection of games, which while wide, is not particularly exciting. There are a handful of classics, but clearly many, many more that couldn't be snagged. And that disappointment isn't helped by the controller. The joystick that comes with the C64 Mini is stiff, and seems to suffer from some lag in places. It's just not a great way to play the games on offer here and that really detracts from the experience.

If your Commodore 64 nostalgia runs deep then this has plenty to offer you, but anyone looking to dive back into some of gaming's history might be better served with other options out there.

VERDICT 6/10

GAMING CLOTHING



STREET FIGHTER

With artwork taken from the most recent remaster of *Super Street Fighter II* (by UDON Entertainment), this is a really nicely styled shirt that manages to honour the game and look pretty cool doing it.
www.playstation-gear.com



RAVEN

This shirt is inspired by an identical option that Chloe Price can wear in *Life Is Strange: Before The Storm*. The clothing and styling of those games has been fantastic and this is a nicely subtle nod to them.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



SNES CONTROLLER

We don't always go for a broad pattern on our t-shirts, but we could actually see ourselves wearing this one, not least because of the nice large print of the SNES controller design and sleeve logo detailing.
www.emp.co.uk

THE BEST FUNKO POP! VINYLS

THE DEVIL

PRICE: **£9.99**

We wondered how far Funko Pops would go many years ago, and what's been cool to see is that it's expanded far beyond the mainstream character depictions and into some fun niche areas. Take for instance this mischievous and devious rendition of the Devil from *Cuphead*.
FORBIDDENPLANET.COM





WATCHER

PRICE: **£12.99**

Some characters don't translate to Funko Pop figures all that well for us, and so while Aloy is available in this format, we'd much rather have one of these Watchers guarding our desks. The cuter interpretation makes these wandering predators into a rather nice office pet if you ask us. We'd like to see if any of the larger mechs could be translated as well.
WWW.EMP.CO.UK

PAC-MAN

PRICE: **£9.99**

One of the great legends of the gaming industry, historically round and made somewhat square by the conventions of the form, somehow losing none of his inherent charm or poise in the process. Such is the strength of Pac-Man as a character that this Funko looks very cool indeed. You can pick up all of the ghosts, and Ms. Pac-Man as well if you fancy.
FORBIDDENPLANET.COM



ATLAS

PRICE: **£9.99**

Both Atlas and P-Body are available in Funko form, which is great to see. These characters haven't had anywhere near the amount of love and adoration they deserve, and while the Companion Cube will always come first and the Gun Turrets second, these guys pick up joint third in line of importance to us. This Atlas one works particularly well thanks to its inherent stumpiness.
FORBIDDENPLANET.COM



D.VA WITH MEKA

PRICE: **£32.99**

What's better than a Pop Vinyl of your favourite *Overwatch* hero? A supersized one of course. This is a really cool rendition of D.Va with her mech Meka. You can actually place D. Va inside the robot, which works really well. Other *Overwatch* characters are available (as we're about to look at), but this special take is a standout one for us.
WWW.EMP.CO.UK



REINHARDT

PRICE: **£19.99**

Another supersized *Overwatch* character to sit alongside your D.Va, but that only makes sense since both she and Reinhardt are tanks in the game. We love the way the oversized heads of the Funko Pops really bring out the helmet of this armour. Side question, has Blizzard explained how he handles swinging a hammer with no depth perception? We haven't looked into it.
WWW.EMP.CO.UK



JACK & BT

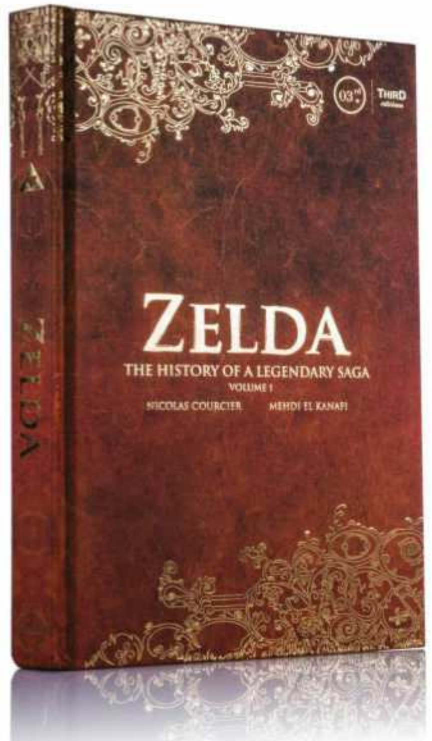
PRICE: **£24.99**

We round things off with another excellent supersized design, and once again it's all about a pilot and a mech, this time though looking at *Titanfall 2*'s Jack and BT-7274 (or just BT), who starred in the rather surprisingly good single-player campaign of Respawn's most recent release. They strike an imposing figure together, and have translated really well to this design format.
WWW.FORBIDDENPLANET.CO.UK



ZELDA: THE HISTORY OF THE LEGENDARY SAGA – VOLUME 1

PUBLISHER: **THIRD EDITIONS**



This is our second title from Third Editions in a row, and once again it's an in-depth and focused look at one of the industry's most respected and celebrated franchises. Much like the BioShock book Third Editions produced, this look at the Zelda franchise breaks down each game in the series (not including the most recent one, *Breath Of The Wild*) with analysis of its various innovations over the years and reflections on their individual impact on the industry.

While it doesn't have any exclusive or new interview access with any of the series' creative talent, it does draw from every possible source to offer as comprehensive a retrospective on the making of the games in this franchise as you could wish to read. Authors Nicolas Courcier and Mehdi El Kanafi (who also worked on the BioShock book) have managed to piece together some interesting pieces of trivia, as well as connect the dots between even Zelda's earliest releases with modern classics.

Compared to the BioShock release, *The History Of The Legendary Saga* features a lot less reflection of philosophical and sociological concepts, but then the title of the book is pretty clear about what you should expect to get. As the book takes each game in turn, it attempts to place it within some degree of context, but its primary interest is recounting its making and the initial responses it received.

Towards the end we get some of the more contemplative questions and topics looking at the role of Link as a hero, its connection and adaptation of classic myth structures and the relationship we have with Zelda and Ganon (as quest and catalyst) through the series. We could have done with that section being a little longer, as it has some very interesting ideas, but overall this is a fine academic exploration of the series. And we should mention that while this is Volume 1, there is currently no Volume 2. We assume Third Edition is leaving room for further conversations and breakdowns in the coming years.

www.thirdeditions.com

VERDICT 8/10



PLAYING WITH FEELINGS: VIDEO GAMES AND AFFECT

This looks to be an interesting academic study of the ways in which videogames affect and allow us to explore emotions that might otherwise not be readily available to us in our daily lives. If you're interested in exploring the more thoughtful side of the industry then this might well be for you.

www.waterstones.com



NBA JAM

Boss Fight Books has been putting together a series of fascinating single game studies, and the latest round of them is hitting shelves as we speak. This looks at one of the all-time great sports games and gets into the details with the team behind it for a full account of how the insane action was created.

www.amazon.co.uk



HALO: RISE OF ATRIOX

This is a five-chapter anthology collection telling the story of the rise of Banished leader Atriox from *Halo Wars 2*. As ever, the wider lore and story going on behind the Halo series is as fascinating and engrossing as the games that come out (sometimes more so), and this is no different.

www.darkhorse.com



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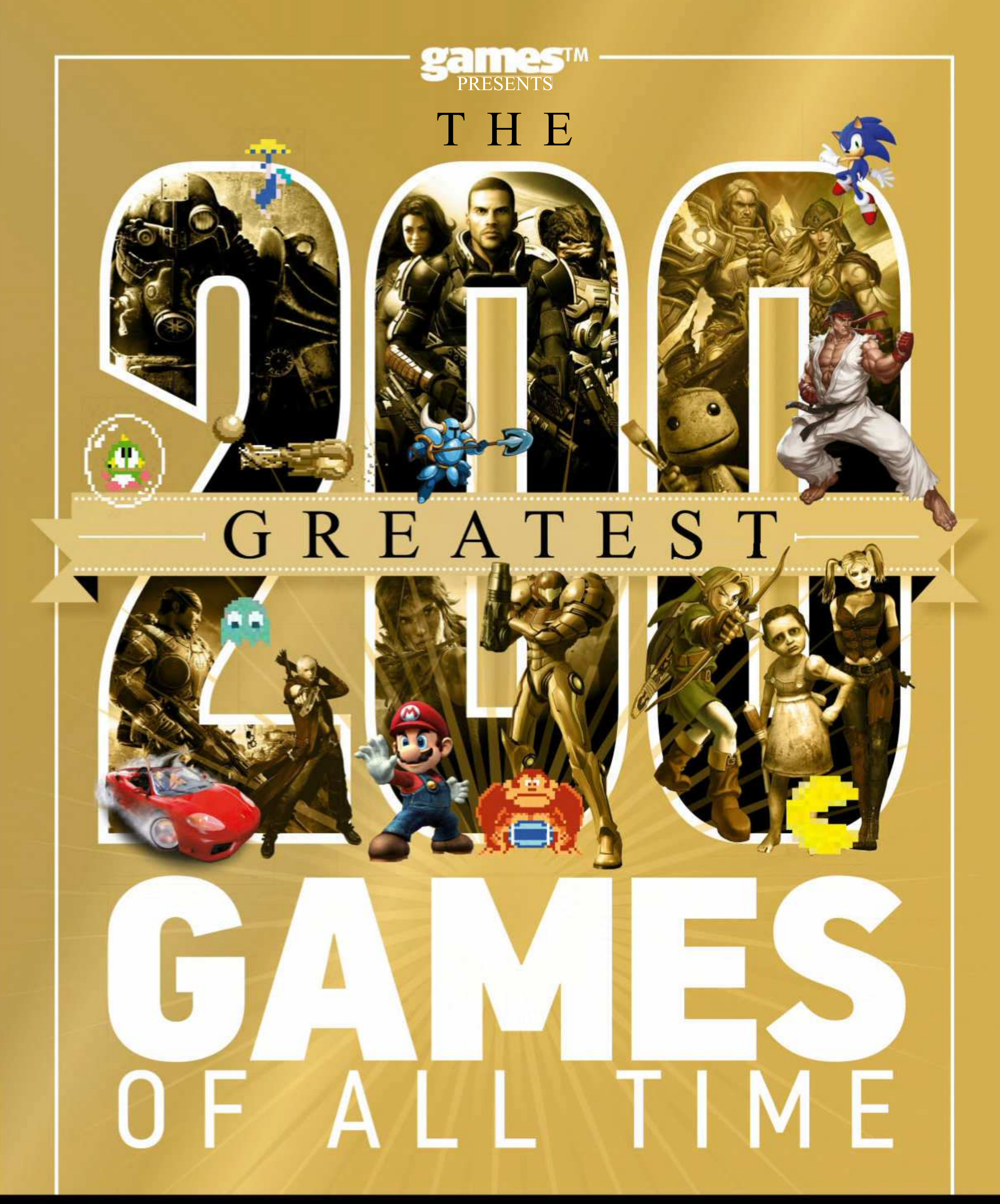
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gamesTM PRESENTS

THE 200 GREATEST GAMES OF ALL TIME



OVER 40 YEARS OF INDUSTRY-DEFINING CLASSICS



Why the word greatest? Why not best, or top? Why not something more specific, like most influential? We've been pondering this question for a while, ever since issue 200 of **games™** began looming in the near distance and the prospect of following up issue 100's Greatest Games list became a reality. What do we mean by greatest?

Well, in some ways we mean all of the things above. For us a great game is a game that is technically excellent, innovative, influential and has longevity. Many games are a few of these things, but few are all of them. As such, in the list that follows you'll see a good mix of classic and modern titles, all of which are here because they struck the strongest balance of playability and impact, achieving an outstanding level of technical quality for their time and possessing innovation that still holds true today.

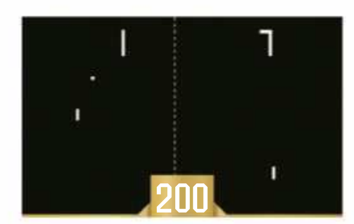
Perhaps above all other things, this list of the 200 Greatest Games represents **games™**. These are the games that stand for us. This list represents everything that we as a magazine value about the videogames industry.

There were many that have not made the cut (our long list started at over 700), and many of them will likely be cherished favourites in your lives. But that's all part of the fun of a list, right? Agreeing with some of it, disagreeing with the rest. So, by all means tell us how wrong we are by emailing us at **gamestm@ futurnet.com** or messaging us on Twitter **@gamesTMmag**.

All that being said, I genuinely hope you enjoy the list to follow. If nothing else, I hope it reminds you of just some of the games that have helped to shape our lives and made this industry what it is today.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



PONG

■ DEVELOPER: **ATARI** ■ **1972**

It seems only right that we should begin our list of the 200 greatest games with one that in many ways represents the beginning of our understanding of the medium. Two-player action, simplifying tennis (or is it more air-hockey) to paddles and a single sprite, and yet *Pong* is still an incredibly playable and enjoyable game. Our journey started here.



KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

■ DEVELOPER: **CARDBOARD COMPUTER** ■ **2013**

It might be five years in the making but *Kentucky Route Zero* has still been able to establish itself as one of the clearest and most substantial creative visions of the current generation. Beautiful, evocative and deeply subversive, this point-and-click adventure will stand the test of time as a truly powerful work of art in the interactive medium.



DUCKTALES

■ DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** ■ **1989**

Still considered one of the few really great licensed games ever made, *DuckTales* had the benefit of fun characters and music before it even started, but taking a leaf out of the Mario book with hidden secrets in some stages and varied enemy design, it's still the bouncing mechanic and how it adds risk and reward to the action that makes this game great.



MANIC MINER

■ DEVELOPER: **MATTHEW SMITH** ■ **1983**

One of the original platformers, and yet, in its neon sprites and chiptune music you can see the entire legacy of the genre in front of your eyes. Collect the keys, avoid the enemies and escape the room. It's a formula that Mario Vs Donkey Kong would jazz up many years later, but all of the core gameplay is right here.



PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

■ DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS** ■ **2005**

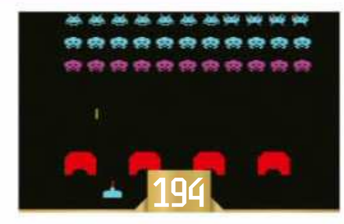
This launch title for the Xbox 360 offered what would be a well-earned victory lap for a beloved genre; *Project Gotham Racing 3* is the last truly great arcade racer. It offered an unparalleled sense of speed and style, not to mention a dazzling array of opportunities for showboating behind the wheel of some of the slickest rides ever envisioned.



ELITE

■ DEVELOPER: **FRONTIER** ■ **1984**

Elite's open-ended design, revolutionary physics engine and boundary-pushing 3D graphics enshrined it as legend back in 1984. It might not look like much now, but *Elite* is responsible for laying a lot of the groundwork of the modern industry, effectively creating the framework for modern space flight sims and paving the way for persistent open-world games.



SPACE INVADERS

■ DEVELOPER: **TAITO** ■ **1978**

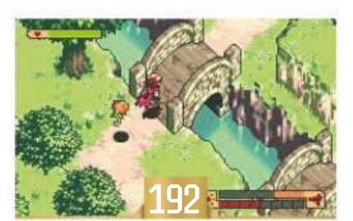
A true original. A game that transitioned from arcades to home computers and consoles. A game that helped to establish the rules for high-score chasing arcade experiences. *Space Invaders* is a shorthand for groundbreaking videogame action that some consider the true revolutionary that turned games from curiosity into entertainment to be reckoned with.



HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

■ DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE** ■ **2006**

IO Interactive held you truly accountable for your decisions in *Hitman: Blood Money*, and in doing so it created one of the greatest stealth games of all times. It was a pure simulation presented through gorgeous scaled-down sandboxes, rewarding those that could pull off the perfect professional hit while punishing the clumsy through an ever-escalating set of emergent difficulty options.



BOKTAI: THE SUN IS IN YOUR HANDS

■ DEVELOPER: **KONAMI** ■ **2003**

Unbelievably smart and beautifully designed, *Boktai* is one of the most original videogames ever made. The GBA cartridge came equipped with a photometric light sensor that measured the amount of sunlight exposure to it, as the sun powered the in-game weapon and altered the difficulty and presentation of the dungeons, forcing players outside to enjoy this truly wonderful adventure-RPG.



UNTIL DAWN

DEVELOPER: **SUPERMASSIVE GAMES** ■ **2015**

Until Dawn is an authentic movie-going experience expertly transposed to the medium of interactive entertainment. It captured the thrills, the tension and the style of the slasher genre without missing a beat, and it did so while still pursuing a truly innovative design. Its clever use of control systems, divergent narrative paths and excellent voice acting come together to create a truly excellent experience.



SHENMUE

DEVELOPER: **SEGA AM2** ■ **1999**

The sheer ambition of Yu Suzuki's multi-part plans and gameplay for the Shenmue series remains breathtaking and so much of that can be felt in this opening game too. The way in which it mixed classic RPG gameplay, social simulation and real-world environments together really hasn't been matched since. No wonder then it engenders such passionate fans.



POPULOUS

DEVELOPER: **BULLFROG PRODUCTIONS** ■ **1989**

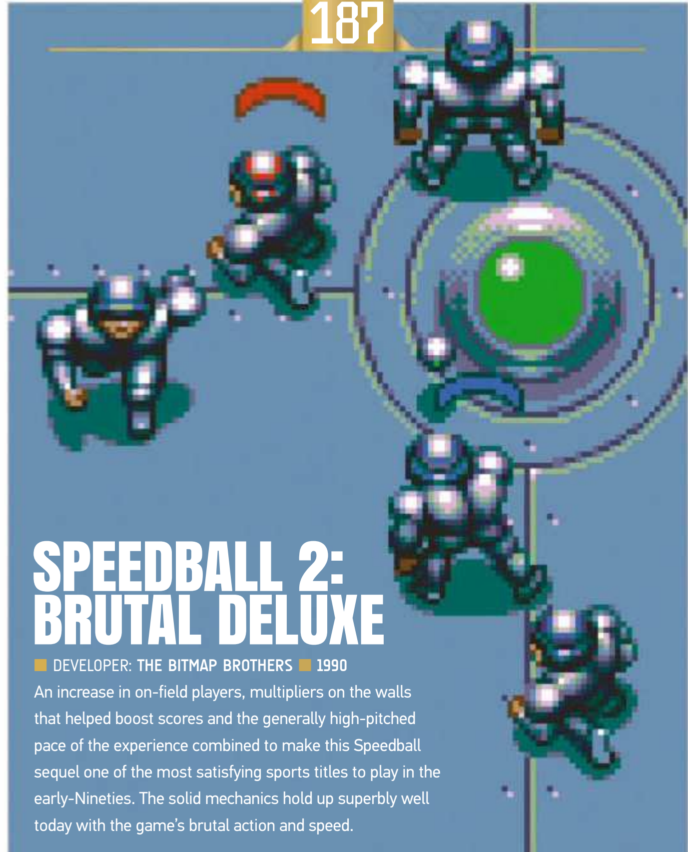
As likely the first god game, you might imagine that *Populous* was somehow limited in terms of features or challenges. However, with 500 levels for you to test your omnipotent powers on, nothing could be further from the truth. The challenge of conquering other tribes through spiritual manipulation and literal land creation was really quite ingenious.



RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTRÉAL** ■ **2015**

Two years of intense iteration from Ubisoft Montréal has ensured that *Rainbow Six Siege* has turned from a good idea to a legitimately excellent tactical shooter. The destructive environments create a continually evolving battlefield, while the rather impressive balance struck between its litany of commanders ensure that no two rounds of play are ever the same.



SPEEDBALL 2: BRUTAL DELUXE

DEVELOPER: **THE BITMAP BROTHERS** ■ **1990**

An increase in on-field players, multipliers on the walls that helped boost scores and the generally high-pitched pace of the experience combined to make this Speedball sequel one of the most satisfying sports titles to play in the early-Nineties. The solid mechanics hold up superbly well today with the game's brutal action and speed.



BUBBLE BOBBLE

DEVELOPER: **TAITO** ■ **1986**

Some of the great arcade platformers of the mid-Eighties are just so incredible to play and *Bubble Bobble* is right in among the best with its wonderful scoring mechanic of capturing enemies in bubbles and then bursting them for fruit. The stages are so minimal and yet offer fantastic tactical options for getting and then popping them. And such fun music too.



LEGACY OF KAIN: SOUL REAVER

DEVELOPER: **CRYSTAL DYNAMICS** ■ **1999**

When it first hit the shelves, *Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver* wasn't just unparalleled in the adventure game space, it was unprecedented. Its atmosphere was all encompassing; dark, bloody and brutal, it was impossible to not get caught up in its killer aesthetic, idolise its cool characters, or fall in love with its intelligent dimension-hopping design.



SNATCHER

DEVELOPER: **KONAMI** ■ **1988**

Hideo Kojima may be best known for the Metal Gear franchise, but one of his best titles came long before the adventures of Solid Snake. *Snatcher* is a groundbreaking videogame, best remembered for the way it packed breathtaking detail, excellent world building and a complex, layered science-fiction story into the framework of a visual novel. The resulting experience was astounding.



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ULTIMA ONLINE

■ DEVELOPER: **ORIGIN SYSTEMS** ■ **1997**

As one of our earliest MMO experiences, *Ultima Online* has lived long in the memory, but what's doubly impressive is just how huge its player interaction moments were. That's part of why so many players are still enjoying *Ultima* today. Indeed, thousands of players can be involved in massive events together. It set an amazing bar and it still succeeds in delivering to that bar.



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OUTRUN 2006: COAST TO COAST

■ DEVELOPER: **SUMO DIGITAL** ■ **2006**

Since this includes the original *OutRun 2* stages and a whole bunch of additional content, on top of being an incredibly faithful remaking of the series' famous gameplay style by Sumo Digital, it's not hard to pick this incarnation of the racer as our representative in this list. This drift-happy, blue sky racer needs to be in everybody's lives.



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PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY

■ DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** ■ **2001**

A visual novel set in the midst of the judicial system should never have worked, and yet there's something uniquely enthralling about *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* that is simply impossible to ignore. Tasked with defending clients and cross-examining witnesses, navigating your way through investigations and court dates becomes a multi-pieced puzzle that never fails to perplex or entertain.

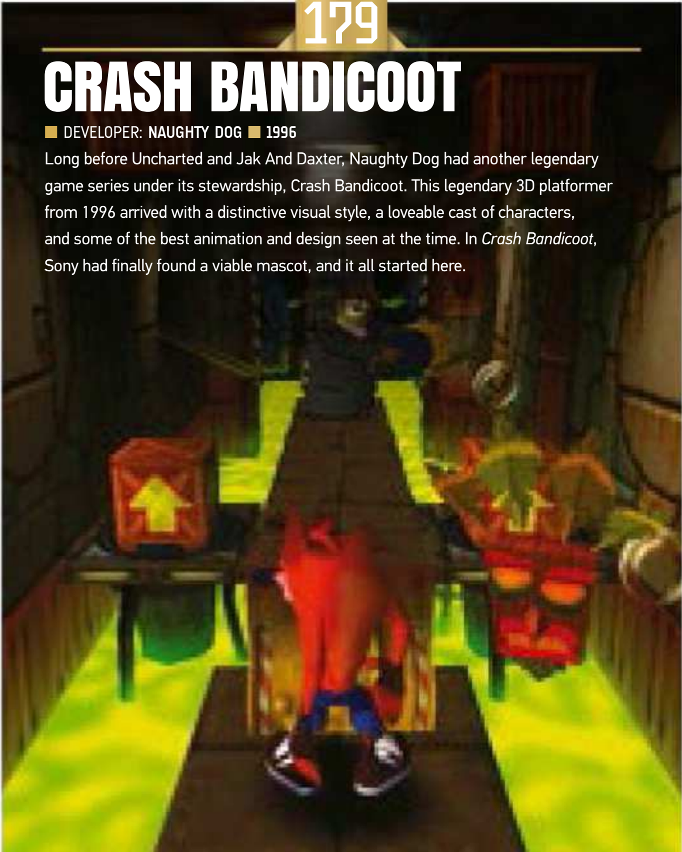


180

TITANFALL

■ DEVELOPER: **RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT** ■ **2014**

True revolutions in the shooter space are difficult to come by, particularly now, in an era so clearly dominated by monsters of the genre. But Respawn changed it all with *Titanfall*. It's a science-fiction retooling of the David and Goliath story, pushing nimble soldiers into battle against monstrous mechanical giants in these beautifully designed spaces. It was fast, frantic and, perhaps most importantly, it was expertly balanced.



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CRASH BANDICOOT

■ DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG** ■ **1996**

Long before Uncharted and Jak And Daxter, Naughty Dog had another legendary game series under its stewardship, Crash Bandicoot. This legendary 3D platformer from 1996 arrived with a distinctive visual style, a loveable cast of characters, and some of the best animation and design seen at the time. In *Crash Bandicoot*, Sony had finally found a viable mascot, and it all started here.



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SSX TRICKY

■ DEVELOPER: **EA CANADA** ■ **2001**

Outrageous. That's the word best used to describe EA's snowboarding stunt racing game. *SSX Tricky* has it all: slick controls, gravity defying stunts, high-intensity racing, tons of personality and, of course, an absolutely killer soundtrack. It also has something else going for it, something far more unquantifiable – it is just a hell of a lot of fun to play.



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CRAZY TAXI

■ DEVELOPER: **HITMAKER** ■ **1999**

There's something delightfully approachable about *Crazy Taxi*. Its simple controls and vibrant visuals help promote a comfortable atmosphere, which is the perfect scene-setter before the chaos kicks off. *Crazy Taxi* is an adrenaline dash of enjoyment, purpose built to crash a smile across the face of any and all that should play it. It's simple, but it's all the better because of it.



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RESOGUN

■ DEVELOPER: **HOUSEMARQUE** ■ **2013**

Resogun may look like a mere throwback to a simpler time of arcade gaming, but that assessment couldn't be any further from the mark. *Resogun* continues to impress to this day because of its lighting fast pacing, lagless gameplay experience, super slick controls, thunderous soundtrack and impressive use of voxels to create a dazzling visual spectacle.



WORMS

■ DEVELOPER: **TEAM 17** ■ **1995**

It doesn't matter how many sequels it receives or how much it is iterated upon, because there is a very pure thrill to be discovered in the original *Worms*. This turn-based 2D artillery game found fun in the simplicity of open warfare, tasking players with coming out on top by any means necessary – and sometimes, the means are incredibly ridiculous.



ROCKET LEAGUE

■ DEVELOPER: **PSYONIX** ■ **2015**

A genuine phenomenon, *Rocket League* continues to defy all expectation. A vehicular football game that arrived to little fanfare, it quickly exploded onto the radar of an entire generation of players. If you're rolling solo or partying up with friends, playing competitively or just playing for fun, *Rocket League* continues to be one of the most consistently fulfilling games available.



THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK: ESCAPE FROM BUTCHER BAY

■ DEVELOPER: **STARBREEZE STUDIOS** ■ **2004**

For the longest time, movie-based games were something of a running joke. And then *Escape From Butcher Bay* came along; it completely flipped the tables. It's bold and brilliant, in a way few other Xbox games ever were. The blend of action, stealth and shooting is fantastic, as too is its flexibility – it worked overtime to accommodate and encourage experimental play.



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REZ

■ DEVELOPER: **UNITED GAME ARTISTS** ■ **2001**

The evolution of music and games as interweaving and complementary forces found its zenith with *Rez*, a game whose beats are as iconic as its third-person on-rails shooting. Many games have attempted to mimic this marriage of rhythm action and gameplay and no one can touch Tetsuya Mizuguchi's vision and execution.



GUNSTAR HEROES

■ DEVELOPER: **TREASURE** ■ **1993**

For chaotic run and gun action you need look no further than *Gunstar Heroes*, gorgeous and blistering in its pace, putting younger games to shame. The level and boss design really need praise, but it's the overall structure of the shooting and leaping mechanics that make every second playing this game an intense and extended delight.



UFO: ENEMY UNKNOWN

■ DEVELOPER: **MYTHOS GAMES, MICROPROSE** ■ **1994**

Responsible for revising and enshrining many staples of the tactical strategy genre, *UFO: Enemy Unknown* is an important milestone in the evolution of the industry. This is the birthplace of XCOM and it's no surprise that it spawned a raft of imitators. Its turn-based combat is iconic, its AI systems are progressive and the escalating alien threats are tough-as-nails.



FABLE II

■ DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD STUDIOS** ■ **2008**

The world of Albion is a wonderful place to explore and one we deeply miss, but thankfully we can always go back to this incarnation, with its fantastic mix of melee, shooting and magic gameplay, personalisation and characters who are quintessentially Lionhead. Its balance of humour, style and gameplay is incredibly strong.



NBA JAM

■ DEVELOPER: **MIDWAY** ■ **1993**

One of the most stellar examples of how a sports game doesn't need to stick all that closely to the original sport in order to be incredible fun, *NBA Jam* played fast and loose with the rules of basketball, but was all the better for it. Its emphasis on scoring, building up the bragging rights with its high-energy commentary, makes it a great multiplayer choice to this day.



TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

■ DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTRÉAL** ■ **2005**

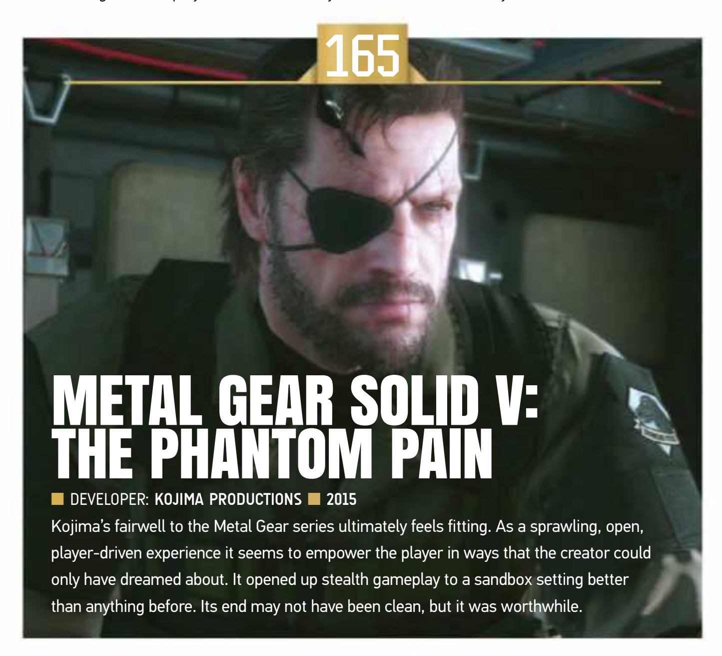
Sam Fisher finally hit his stride on this third outing. *Chaos Theory* may have *looked* sensational, but its true wonder was buried beneath the surface. Simplified stealth mechanics only served to improve the series' intense cat-and-mouse action, while the wildly improved enemy AI set a new benchmark for the genre. *Chaos Theory* was hide and seek as you'd never seen it before.



GALAGA

■ DEVELOPER: **NAMCO** ■ **1981**

As a pure arcade shooter experience, the movement, patterns of play and combat of *Galaga* remains something to behold. Many still pinpoint the ability for aliens to capture your fighter, turning it against you once you respawn into the fight. As an evolution of the *Space Invaders* form, *Galaga* was a masterstroke.



METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

■ DEVELOPER: **KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS** ■ **2015**

Kojima's fairwell to the Metal Gear series ultimately feels fitting. As a sprawling, open, player-driven experience it seems to empower the player in ways that the creator could only have dreamed about. It opened up stealth gameplay to a sandbox setting better than anything before. Its end may not have been clean, but it was worthwhile.



HEAVY RAIN

■ DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM** ■ **2010**

David Cage ventured into the uncanny valley and returned with a dark, twisted, emotionally raw and wonderfully crafted noir tale. The experience of hunting for the game's Origami Killer across multiple paths, succeeding and failing in each, to get a multitude of endings hasn't been matched for narrative tension and personalisation.



S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

■ DEVELOPER: **GSC GAME WORLD** ■ **2007**

Shadow Of Chernobyl is wrought with tension and despair; a treacherous post-apocalyptic setting ensured *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* had an atmosphere unlike any other, a dark and haunting terrain that only helped to immerse us in the excellent non-linear storyline and ground the FPS/RPG hybrid mechanical design. *Shadow Of Chernobyl*'s influence and impact continues to simmer beneath the surface of modern shooter design.



ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

■ DEVELOPER: **MOON STUDIOS** ■ **2015**

When it comes to games of the Metroidvania persuasion, their success or failure comes down to a question of balance. Can the game strike a balance between pixel-perfect platforming and open-ended level design, between raw storytelling and scenarios that present real depth and challenge? *Ori And The Blind Forest* achieved all of this, and so much more. Gorgeous, haunting and emotional, it's wonderful in almost every way.



LIFE IS STRANGE

■ DEVELOPER: **DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT** ■ **2015**

Life Is Strange is a transformative and utterly transfixing narrative adventure. Detailing the struggles of millennial youth in small town America, this interactive story found the space to be thrilling, poignant and reflective, propelled forward by its desire to explore topics and tackle subjects that the industry rarely approaches, such as social division, online bullying and suicide.



THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT

■ DEVELOPER: **LOOKING GLASS STUDIOS** ■ **1998**

Looking Glass will always be known as the studio that helped change the way that we play and approach videogames, and one of its best was *Thief: The Dark Project*. Its state-of-the-art artificial intelligence, incredible use of light, shadow and sound, and open-ended design that propagated moral ambiguity – letting us forgo combat entirely, should we be so inclined – is as groundbreaking today as it was two decades ago.



SLEEPING DOGS

■ DEVELOPER: **UNITED FRONT GAMES** ■ **2012**

Few games confidently step to Grand Theft Auto and walk away unscathed, let alone victorious. But that's why *Sleeping Dogs* was such an utter delight. Its open-world interpretation of contemporary Hong Kong was expressive and exhaustively detailed, while its melee-focussed, parkour-imbued combat systems were empowering to execute. *Sleeping Dogs* was ambitious, but its ideas were executed with great precision.



SONIC CD

■ DEVELOPER: **SONIC TEAM** ■ **1993**

There's always going to be an argument over the best Sonic sequels, but while different sidekicks and playable characters are nice, we lean towards the time-jumping mechanics introduced in this game as a genuine and meaningful addition to the experience. It's the Sonic you know and love, but now with past and future world hopping.



WARIOWARE: TWISTED!

■ DEVELOPER: **INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS, NINTENDO SPD** ■ **2004**

The minigame experiences of WarioWare have been near-equally brilliant across the board, but for our money (and these days it costs a little bit), this motion-sensing release for the GBA stands above the rest. A gyro sensor in the cartridge means that the super-quick challenges can be solved by tilting your device. Ingenious, delightful and endlessly fun.



DOUBLE DRAGON

■ DEVELOPER: **TECHNOS JAPAN** ■ **1987**

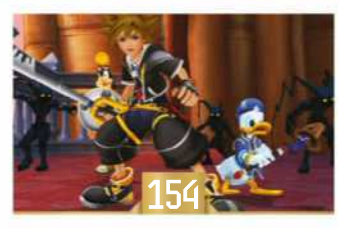
When you consider the time *Double Dragon* came out, it was lightyears ahead of the competition as a beat-'em-up, with a speed of movement, attack variety, enemy design and level design well in advance of anything else in arcades. That's one of many reasons why the game plays just as well now and remains a contender.



COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT

■ DEVELOPER: **WESTWOOD STUDIOS** ■ **1996**

When Command & Conquer made its debut in 1995, it quickly took the world by storm, and is partly responsible for popularising the strategy genre around the globe. But it wouldn't be until this 1996 sequel that it really hit its stride, with *Red Alert* offering stellar action and a truly excellent user-interface. It became one of the first strategy games to feature functioning competitive online play.



KINGDOM HEARTS II

■ DEVELOPER: **SQUARE ENIX** ■ **2005**

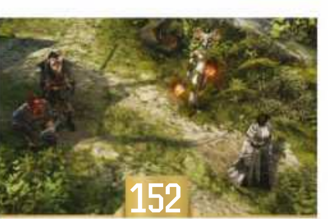
It's still impressive, really, that Disney and Square Enix were able to make any of this work. *Kingdom Hearts II* took the Final Fantasy X Disney crossover RPG action to new, impossible heights, delivering a truly ridiculous, twisting story supported by beautifully flashy combat and a whole host of fan favourite characters arriving on the scene to aid and abet Sora on this journey of a lifetime.



WIPEOUT 2097

■ DEVELOPER: **PSYGNOSIS** ■ **1996**

As a refinement and improvement in every way on the original, we have to pick Psygnosis' insane racing sequel for our list. We've spoken plenty before about this series' early cultural impact, but *2097* was somehow also a faster game that its predecessor. Thankfully, the improved controls meant that you could get to grips with it much more easily, too.



DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

■ DEVELOPER: **LARIAN STUDIOS** ■ **2017**

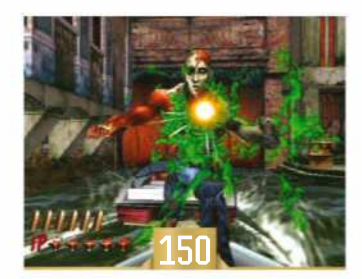
We're blessed to be in the midst of a cRPG renaissance and right now and the pick of the bunch is Larian's stunning sequel that built beautifully on its fantastic *Original Sin*. Not only is it mechanically near perfect for the form, but its story, characters and missions all combine to make something truly superb. An absolute must for genre fans.



TEAM FORTRESS 2

■ DEVELOPER: **VALVE CORPORATION** ■ **2017**

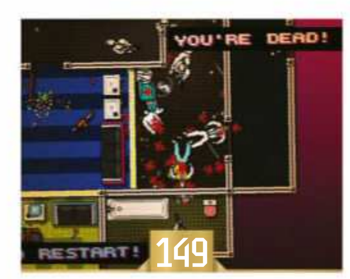
Valve took it upon itself to refresh the online shooter in 2007. *Team Fortress 2* is a vibrant videogame that was built around wickedly smart objective and map design that promoted teamwork above all else, while its cast of unique, funny characters only served to establish it as legend. Its easy-going approach to FPS design laid the groundwork for some of this generation's most popular videogames.



THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD 2

■ DEVELOPER: **WOW ENTERTAINMENT** ■ **1998**

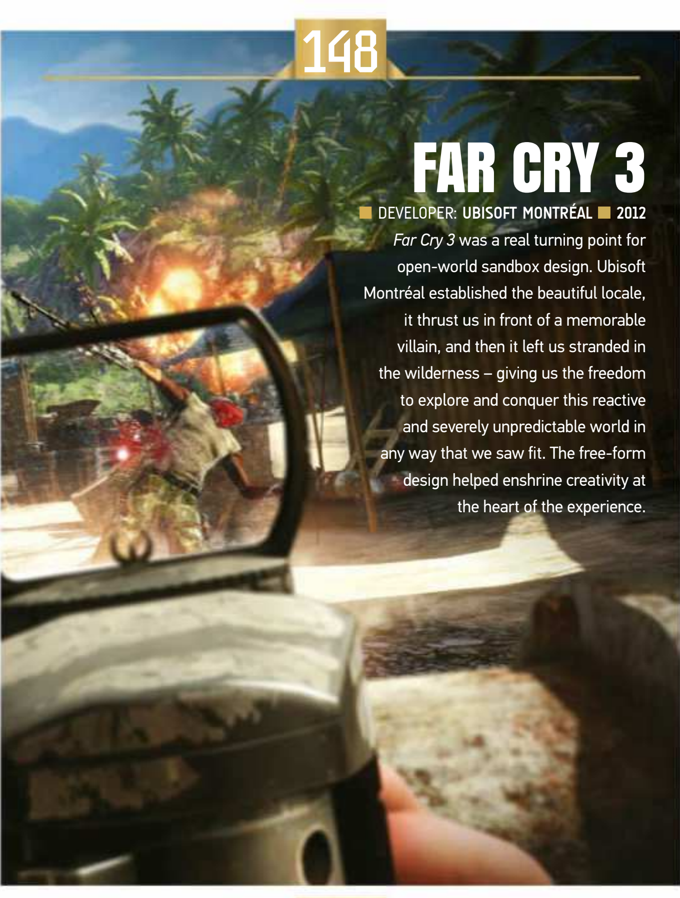
If we're talking about games that don't age, then arcade lightgun titles are more or less in a league of their own. While their visuals may look a little dated and the voice acting can be atrocious, the pure gunplay of something like *The House Of The Dead 2* on a cabinet is just incredible. The enemy variety and gore of this one particularly stands out.



HOTLINE MIAMI

■ DEVELOPER: **DENNATON GAMES** ■ **2012**

All hail the ultra-violence. *Hotline Miami* is imbued with this wicked spirit; raw brutality that manifests itself to a thunderous bass line. There's actually something quite beautiful to *Hotline Miami*'s construction, behind all of the blood and the bodies that is. It's pure choreography; you see that as you dance elegantly out of a litany of bad situations, with baseball bat in hand.

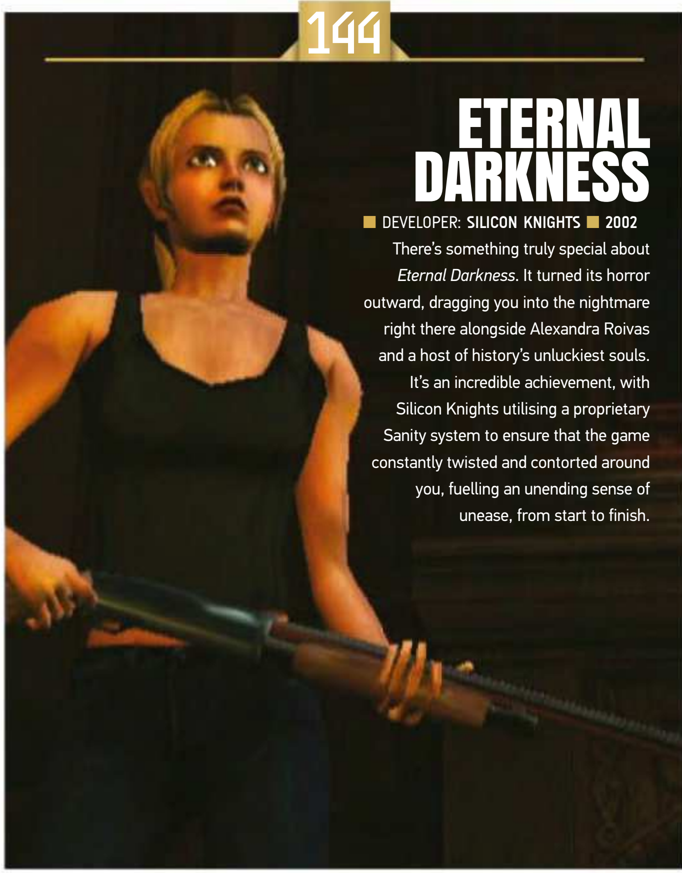


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FAR CRY 3

■ DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTRÉAL** ■ **2012**

Far Cry 3 was a real turning point for open-world sandbox design. Ubisoft Montréal established the beautiful locale, it thrust us in front of a memorable villain, and then it left us stranded in the wilderness – giving us the freedom to explore and conquer this reactive and severely unpredictable world in any way that we saw fit. The free-form design helped enshrine creativity at the heart of the experience.



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ETERNAL DARKNESS

■ DEVELOPER: **SILICON KNIGHTS** ■ **2002**

There's something truly special about *Eternal Darkness*. It turned its horror outward, dragging you into the nightmare right there alongside Alexandra Roivas and a host of history's unluckiest souls. It's an incredible achievement, with Silicon Knights utilising a proprietary Sanity system to ensure that the game constantly twisted and contorted around you, fuelling an unending sense of unease, from start to finish.



PEGGLE

■ DEVELOPER: **POPCAP GAMES** ■ **2007**

PopCap's wonderful puzzle experience instantly earned its place in the pantheon of great games of its type with the kind of table design, power-ups and feedback that makes it very hard to stop playing. It was always easy to understand the rules of *Peggle*, but mastering the bounce angles, hitting the drum to stay in play and more was just too fun to stop trying.



ROBOTRON: 2084

■ DEVELOPER: **VID KIDZ** ■ **1982**

The game that popularised the twin joystick control scheme and by extension the twin-stick shooter, *Robotron* is a brilliant arcade actioner that stands up brilliantly for its age. The waves of enemies on screen are relentless and keep you brilliantly on your toes. The sense of danger at all times is just fantastic.



FALLOUT

■ DEVELOPER: **INTERPLAY PRODUCTIONS** ■ **1997**

Arriving at a time in which many were suggesting that the classic RPG was on its deathbed, *Fallout* turned up and breathed new life into the entire scene. Its open-ended design was startling, giving players the freedom to engage in its story in any way that they saw fit, offering a level of depth and detail that few imagined was even possible in the genre.



TOWERFALL: ASCENSION

■ DEVELOPER: **MATT MAKES GAMES** ■ **2014**

Fighting games are notoriously unfriendly to new players. They require every player in a party to be able to hold their own against a potential rival, the fun materialising out of the content itself. *TowerFall* is an excellent fighting game for the whole party to play. Perfectly balanced, with untold depth hidden beneath its surface, it's a game that never fails to feel refreshing replayable.



PERSONA 4

■ DEVELOPER: **ATLUS** ■ **2008**

What is it about *Persona 4* that resonated so clearly? It's the game that finally broke Persona in the West – an achievement in and of itself. But there is more too it than that. *Persona 4* is a fantastic JRPG grounded by complex storytelling and authentic characters. There's something truly impressive in its construction, in its balance between the mundane and the unreal.



COMPANY OF HEROES

■ DEVELOPER: **RELIC ENTERTAINMENT** ■ **2006**

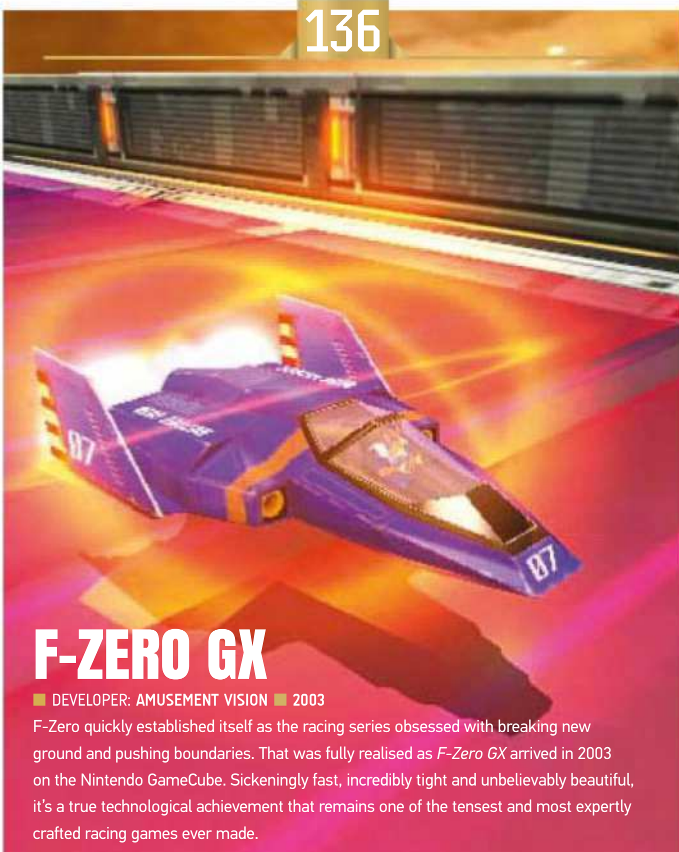
Widely considered to be one of the most excellent real-time strategy games of all time, *Company Of Heroes* is a defining release of the last decade. Grounded in conflicts that helped shape World War II, *Company Of Heroes* still found the space to let you shape the outcome of real-world events, lending it a weight that wasn't reflected by any of its peers in the strategy genre.



METAL SLUG

■ DEVELOPER: **NAZCA CORPORATION** ■ **1996**

It doesn't matter how many times you've played through *Metal Slug* – or how long you stay away from it, for that matter – because there's always a comfort to be found in its embrace. *Metal Slug* harks back to a simpler time of gaming, promoting the pure essence of fun at every opportunity it gets. Simply put, *Metal Slug* is one of the best side-scrolling shooters out there, and it will never go out of style.



F-ZERO GX

■ DEVELOPER: **AMUSEMENT VISION** ■ **2003**

F-Zero quickly established itself as the racing series obsessed with breaking new ground and pushing boundaries. That was fully realised as *F-Zero GX* arrived in 2003 on the Nintendo GameCube. Sickeningly fast, incredibly tight and unbelievably beautiful, it's a true technological achievement that remains one of the tensest and most expertly crafted racing games ever made.



BENEATH A STEEL SKY

■ DEVELOPER: **REVOLUTION SOFTWARE** ■ **1994**

While so many of the most popular point-and-click adventure games sought to whisk players away to bright, humorous fantasy worlds, *Steel Sky* was a different proposition. A dark and gritty cyberpunk thriller made in collaboration between Revolution Software and famed Watchmen artist Dave Gibbons, *Beneath A Steel Sky* is remembered for its incredible atmosphere, smart puzzle design and enthralling narrative direction.



GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK

■ DEVELOPER: **NEVERSOFT** ■ **2007**

Guitar Hero 2 may have improved the complexity and fluidity of the baseline experience, but it would be *Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock* that established it as a true global and cultural phenomenon. It was the setlist that did it; 73 killer tracks, the vast majority of which were master recordings. It only served to create a more compelling and fulfilling fantasy.



THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU

■ DEVELOPER: **SQUARE ENIX, JUPITER** ■ **2007**

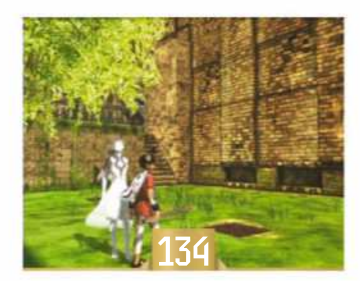
It should never have worked. But, then, that's all a part of its charm. *The World Ends With You* set itself apart from its contemporaries in the space by introducing a deeply complex combat system that tore up the playbook before wrapping it all in a notoriously glorious presentational package. It's certainly one of the finest, and more original, RPGs to arrive on the Nintendo DS.



R-TYPE III: THE THIRD LIGHTNING

■ DEVELOPER: **TAMTEX** ■ **1993**

With its introduction of three force styles for additional support, bigger and more dynamic levels and fantastic bosses, *R-Type III* is easily our favourite of this iconic side-scrolling shooter series. The music throughout the franchise was always amazing, and the shooting so satisfying to get into. This is an amazing example of the format.



ICO

■ DEVELOPER: **SCE JAPAN STUDIO, TEAM ICO** ■ **2001**

Team Ico's opening salvo was a heart-tugging, gorgeously animated wonder. While its later work would up the scale, this simple castle exploration experience with a cursed boy and an enchanted girl, holding hands as you ran and fought for your lives, was like few games before (*Another World* maybe comes to mind). Still a stunning game to play today.



BAYONETTA

■ DEVELOPER: **PLATINUMGAMES** ■ **2009**

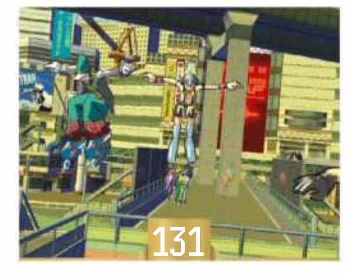
If Ninja Theory's *DmC* was an attempt to partially Westernise Devil May Cry, then *Bayonetta* was creator Hideki Kamiya's attempt to double down on everything esoteric and peculiar about the form. While we like both, we think we know who had more success of the two, as *Bayonetta* took the fluid-combo combat Kamiya had popularised and made something extraordinary.

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SUPER MEAT BOY

■ DEVELOPER: **TEAM MEAT** ■ **2010**

Super Meat Boy is the undisputed king of the punishing indie platformer. It presented an array of increasingly challenging rooms to clear, each of them a seemingly impossible puzzle to be solved through death. A lot of death. *Super Meat Boy* was ultra-hard, super violent and unbelievably all-encompassing. In spite of its crushing difficulty it was endlessly replayable thanks to its masterful balance and lightning-fast respawns.



JET SET RADIO FUTURE

■ DEVELOPER: **SMILEBIT** ■ **2002**

If you're looking for style, attitude and originality, they don't come much better than *Jet Set Radio Future*. Set in a future Tokyo in which all freedom of expression is outlawed, *Jet Set* has you hitting the city on your trusty blades, causing havoc and making a right ol' mess of things to a thunderous off-kilter hip-hop soundtrack.



TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 2

■ DEVELOPER: **NEVERSOFT** ■ **2000**

Attempting to choose the greatest Tony Hawk's game is basically impossible, a task that quickly devolves into arguments over track listings and iconic locales. But good sense – well, that, Millencolin, Fu Manchu and Bad Religion – won out in the end here. *THPS2* is an excellent action sports game that seemed to effortlessly capture the style and joy born out of the burgeoning skater scene.



VIEWTIFUL JOE

■ DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM PRODUCTION STUDIO 4** ■ **2003**

"Henshin A Go-Go, Baby!" Words that are etched into the minds of GameCube owners the world over, *Viewtiful Joe* is a wickedly inventive side-scrolling beat 'em up that quickly earned itself a cult following. Hyper-stylised action, vibrant 3D cel-shaded graphics and a playfully self-aware story all helped to establish *Viewtiful Joe* as a game in a league of its own.



MEGA MAN 2

■ DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** ■ **1988**

Still widely considered to be the best in the series, even after 30 years, *Mega Man 2* is a tough-as-nails action platformer, and the open way in which it allows you to take on its levels, picking up new powers that may aid you elsewhere, is as brilliant as it is simple. The pixel count would improve, new characters would be added, but this was pure Mega Man.



SHOVEL KNIGHT

■ DEVELOPER: **YACHT CLUB GAMES** ■ **2014**

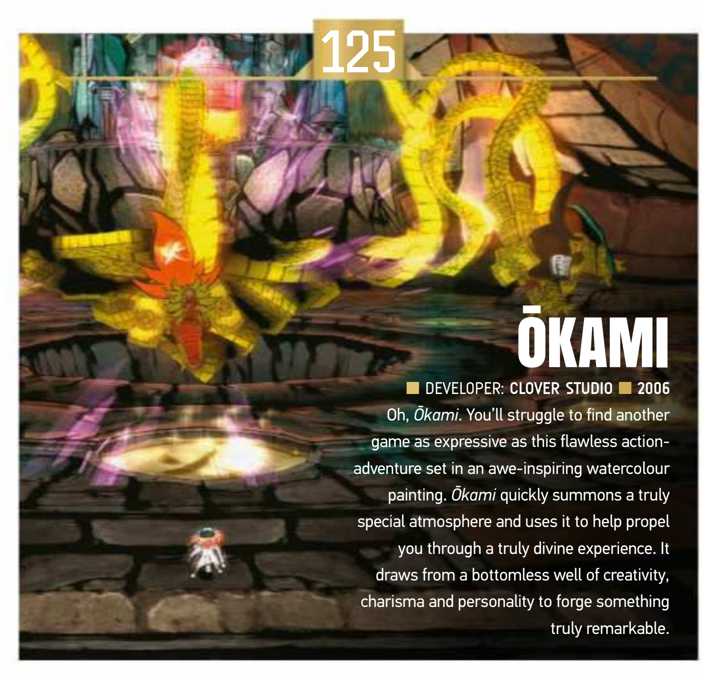
A fair few games have arrived in the last decade built on the legacy of the past – titles that look to leverage nostalgia to find an audience. *Shovel Knight* does this – it's undoubtedly a NES game released in the wrong era – though it's also so much more. Its incredible platforming and smart risk-reward mechanic ensure that it surpasses many of its biggest influences.



VIVA PIÑATA

■ DEVELOPER: **RARE** ■ **2006**

Created by the team responsible for the beloved Banjo-Kazooie series, *Viva Piñata* is a delightful life-simulation game that has you tending to an island of piñata creatures before they are shipped off around the world to be savaged by children at birthday parties. Viva Piñata is a pure expression of joy in a videogame, simply busting at the seams with joy (and candy, *oh so much candy*).



ŌKAMI

■ DEVELOPER: **CLOVER STUDIO** ■ **2006**

Oh, *Ōkami*. You'll struggle to find another game as expressive as this flawless action-adventure set in an awe-inspiring watercolour painting. *Ōkami* quickly summons a truly special atmosphere and uses it to help propel you through a truly divine experience. It draws from a bottomless well of creativity, charisma and personality to forge something truly remarkable.



ROCK BAND

■ DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX** ■ **2007**

Guitar Hero may have pushed players to live out the fantasy of being a guitarist, but it circumvented the most rewarding part of actually *being* a musician – the feeling that you get when you join up with a group of like-minded individuals and raise all hell in perfect unison. By offering guitar, bass, drums and vocals to master, Harmonix created perhaps the perfect party game.



TOMB RAIDER

■ DEVELOPER: **CORE DESIGN** ■ **1996**

The birth of an icon, but the rise of Lara Croft wasn't just down to character design or combat. In fact, combat had very little to do with it, since this was a much more puzzle-focused experience than many remember. Its fantastic translation of Indiana Jones style with modern attitudes made this a stunning early 3D adventure that can still challenge.



BORDERLANDS

■ DEVELOPER: **GEARBOX SOFTWARE** ■ **2009**

Borderlands paved the way for the shared-world shooter as we know it today. In offering a co-op focused FPS that roped in elements and retention mechanics common to the RPG genre – such as loot-based upgrades and numbers, just raw trackable numbers every*where* and on every*thing* – *Borderlands* carved out its own shoot-and-loot niche, marrying traditional FPS sensibilities with a truly wonderous sense of freedom and scale.



FALLOUT 3

■ DEVELOPER: **BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS** ■ **2008**

Nobody thought Bethesda could do it. Bringing the legendary Fallout franchise back from the dead was one thing, attempting to do so while modernising it *and* attempting to appease an overly protective fanbase? Impossible. And yet, here it stands as one of the greatest games ever made; an open-world juggernaut that is overflowing with mystique and intrigue, lovingly crafted and endlessly engaging.



PAPERS, PLEASE

DEVELOPER: **3909 LLC** ■ **2013**

Papers, Please is routinely harrowing, and that's all a part of its charm. Cast as a border agent, you are forced into daily moral quandaries; forced to confront bigotry, corruption and desperation head on as you attempt to manage the flow of immigration into an oppressive regime. *Papers, Please* is a daring, reflective and expertly crafted management sim, and an absolute must play.



FIRE EMBLEM (GBA)

DEVELOPER: **INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS** ■ **2003**

In what is clearly one of the very best strategy and role-playing experiences ever to grace a handheld platform, *Fire Emblem*'s launch on the GBA was a momentous occasion. It delivered incredible accessibility without compromising on its depth or difficulty, featuring an enthralling story, excellent characters and a no-nonsense approach to life and death – it's a mixture that's still undoubtedly impressive to this day.



KATAMARI DAMACY

DEVELOPER: **NAMCO** ■ **2004**

Katamari is a fantastic example of one of the reasons we love videogames so much, as it brings to life the most insane and nonsensical ideas and makes them impossible to put down. Rolling up objects as the Prince to help rebuild the stars in the sky, from paper clips to skyscrapers, the simple act of rolling around these wonderful stages is endlessly charming and captivating. And such great characters along the way.



SUPER MARIO GALAXY

DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD TOKYO** ■ **2007**

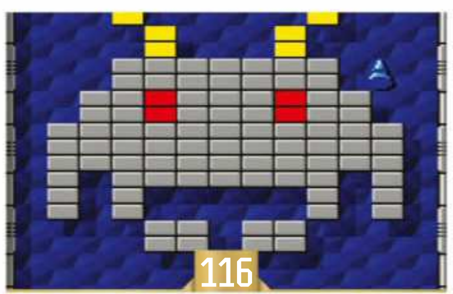
Back when we wondered if the Nintendo Wii could continue to deliver challenging games for hardcore fans, *Super Mario Galaxy* gave us possibly the most imaginative and creative incarnation of the 3D series. Its gravity mechanics and world design made for a fantastic journey that keeps on delivering surprises the deeper you go.



THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

DEVELOPER: **BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS** ■ **2002**

It's here where Bethesda began to pivot into the studio we love so much today. In 2002 it unleashed *Morrowind*, an Elder Scrolls game that pulled back from lore and storytelling and invested heavily in open-ended, freeform gameplay. The world became the starring character, and we were only too eager to get lost within the expansive location; as a result, *Morrowind* is a truly wondrous RPG adventure.



ARKANOID

DEVELOPER: **TAITO** ■ **1986**

We could just as easily have said any version of the Breakout model belongs in this list, but *Arkanoid* stands out as the very best example, with its variety of playing fields, power ups and the precision of the paddle control. In some ways this style was just a single-player version of *Pong*, but we still can't get enough of it.



THE STANLEY PARABLE

DEVELOPER: **GALACTIC CAFE** ■ **2013**

As an exploration and deconstruction of typical videogame behaviour and attempts by developers to herd gamers down particular paths, *The Stanley Parable* was always a fantastic idea, but it's the game's fantastic narration, story and variety, particularly in its 2013 'Remake' release, that make it an essential experience. Every seasoned gamer should play it.



THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON ONE

DEVELOPER: **TELLTALE GAMES** ■ **2012**

The Walking Dead certainly wasn't the first interactive choose-your-own-adventure game, but it might just be the most important. Telltale Games delivered a game that changed the way the industry approaches storytelling, a dazzling signal that audiences were ready for more complex and weighted experiences. The impact of every decision felt integral, and that's a design decision that ensured the story reached a heart-breaking crescendo in its final act that won't be soon forgotten.



ASSASSIN'S CREED II

■ DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL** ■ **2009**

Perfecting so much of the promise and appeal of the original, Creed's second outing gave us a much more charismatic protagonist, a more varied setting, more ways to engage with the game and even more reasons to explore and engage with the world. And the catacombs, harking back to Prince Of Persia, were fantastic.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD** ■ **2000**

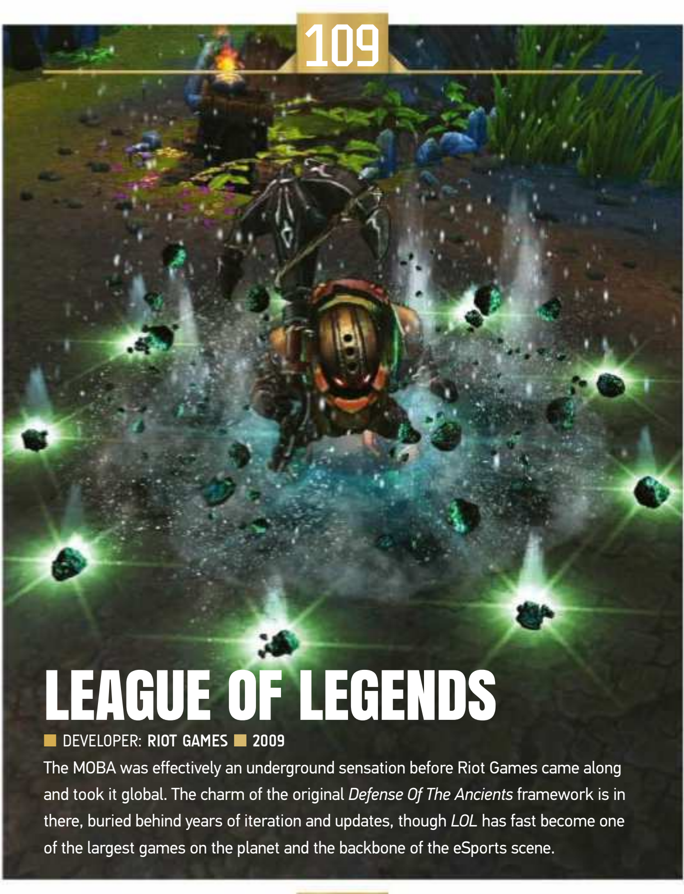
Turning around a follow-up to *Ocarina* so fast was the last thing we had expected, but doing so with such an unusual and inventive game structure as *Majora's Mask* enjoyed was the real surprise. The repeating three-day mechanic was a wonderful touch, darker and smarter than anything we could have hoped for. The best kind of follow-up.



DAY OF THE TENTACLE

■ DEVELOPER: **LUCASARTS** ■ **1993**

What isn't there to love about *Day Of The Tentacle*? Not only was this sequel to *Maniac Mansion* wonderfully written with an array of unforgettable characters, it also happened to offer hours of smartly designed puzzles that stretched ingeniously all throughout time and space. It's no surprise that it is still considered to be one of LucasArts' best and most beloved adventure games.



LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

■ DEVELOPER: **RIOT GAMES** ■ **2009**

The MOBA was effectively an underground sensation before Riot Games came along and took it global. The charm of the original *Defense Of The Ancients* framework is in there, buried behind years of iteration and updates, though *LOL* has fast become one of the largest games on the planet and the backbone of the eSports scene.



SPELUNKY

■ DEVELOPER: **MOSSMOUTH** ■ **2012**

It's been six years since *Spelunky* hit console, and we're still not certain that we've seen all that it has to offer. Mossmouth's wondrous 2D platformer brings organised chaos to procedural generation, and the result is a masterwork of level design. *Spelunky* teaches its systems, mechanics and controls through consistent punishment, yet its impossible to put down once it sinks its hooks into you.



STARDEW VALLEY

■ DEVELOPER: **CONCERNEDAPE** ■ **2016**

Stardew Valley wasn't interested in redefining a genre – it wasn't concerned with fostering new ideas or implementing any great change. *Stardew Valley* was merely interested in taking a good thing and making it even better; refining, combining and condensing elements from across the various sims such as *Harvest Moon* and *Minecraft* and rendering them into an experience that is bursting with charm and personality.



ANOTHER WORLD

■ DEVELOPER: **DELPHINE SOFTWARE** ■ **1991**

A game ahead of its time in terms of bringing cinematic presentation to gaming and pushing narrative design ahead of mechanics, *Another World* remains a magical game to play. The simplicity of its silent storytelling remains incredibly strong, supported by its use of rotoscoping animation. An incredible piece of gaming history.



METAL GEAR SOLID: PEACE WALKER

■ DEVELOPER: **KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS** ■ **2010**

It might not be as famous as its console counterparts, but *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* is one of the most important and influential games in the long-running Metal Gear series. It was a testing ground for new mechanical, narrative and system design for Konami, all of which would be later fleshed out and refined for *MGSV: The Phantom Pain*.


104

GEOMETRY WARS: RETRO EVOLVED

DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS** 2003

It reawakened our love of arcade action, made digital download titles something to watch and put twin stick shooters back on the map, but we love the style, music and AI design of *Geometry Wars*. To this day, it is a deeply compelling experience that demands you give it another go to get your score a little higher.


103

TIME CRISIS II

DEVELOPER: **NAMCO** 1997

It doesn't matter how far technology advances or how complex videogames become in the modern era, because *Time Crisis II* never seems to go out of style. Setting up at a cabinet with a friend and a handful of pound coins is still an absolute delight. *Time Crisis II* is a pure action experience that will forever stand the test of time.


102

DEVIL MAY CRY 3: DANTE'S AWAKENING

DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** 2005

There was always something special about *Devil May Cry 3*. It arrived with such a strong sense of style and speed that you couldn't help but fall in love with it. Capcom finally realised the potential of DMC here, perfecting the fluid combat and combo systems the series had always threatened to deliver. The resulting experience is one of the best hack-and-slash games ever made.


101

HITMAN 2: SILENT ASSASSIN

DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE** 2002

IO Interactive took stealth action to another level when *Silent Assassin* arrived in 2002, giving us the scope and opportunity to truly approach its sandbox levels with a level of freedom we had seldom experienced in the genre. Is there any feeling greater than pulling off a successful hit in *Hitman II*? If there is, we've yet to find it.

100



GONE HOME

DEVELOPER: **THE FULLBRIGHT COMPANY** 2013

Videogames can, and should, be about anything and everything. *Gone Home* certainly wasn't the first game to strip combat and conflict away, but it might be the most successful. Its haunting atmosphere, exhaustive attention to detail and focus on unravelling a personable story – told entirely through environmental storytelling and exploration – helped establish it as a unique and relatable game that must be experienced.


099

LITTLEBIGPLANET 2

DEVELOPER: **MEDIA MOLECULE** 2011

So many games wow us with the ingenuity and imagination of the teams behind them, but while *LittleBigPlanet* did that, it also wowed us with the creativity of its players. *LBP2* gave us everything the original had and then opened the experience up even more so that we as players could really cut loose. There's really nothing like it around.


098

DEMON'S SOULS

DEVELOPER: **FROMSOFTWARE** 2009

There was once a contingent of players who had just about enough of the hand-holding that had become so prevalent in mainstream gaming. *Demon's Souls* was the answer. Progressing through its gothic gauntlets was near impossible, though the sense of accomplishment earned from making the smallest ground was overwhelming. *Demon's Souls* influenced the way combat, challenge and world design was handled for a new generation of action-RPGs.


097

MINECRAFT

DEVELOPER: **MOJANG** 2009

Come for the survival experience, stay for the endless creativity. The phenomenon that *Minecraft* has become shouldn't distract us from the fact that it managed to build over time an incredibly deep survival and construction sandbox that has as much appeal and value to veteran gamers as it does to young children. That remains a remarkable achievement.



SIMCITY

DEVELOPER: **MAXIS** **1989**

There's no two ways about it, *SimCity* absolutely revolutionised the simulation genre. It gave players an unprecedented level of control over the construction and day-to-day management of their city. The amount of content, depth and detail in the package was – *still is* – astounding to this day. The games may have evolved over the years, but this 1989 classic is pure city-building good times.



XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS GAMES** **2012**

Enemy Unknown wasn't just a fantastic retooling of the X-COM brand, it was a total revolution for the turn-based strategy. Firaxis Games took the fundamental ideals of its namesake and completely overhauled everything around them, creating a modern masterpiece in the process. *Enemy Unknown* set a new benchmark for strategy games that few have even come close to clearing.



BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN

DEVELOPER: **CRITERION GAMES** **2004**

When we gave this game 10/10 back in our youth we called it the greatest racing game ever made. Has much changed in the intervening nine years? We're not sure it has. *Burnout 3* remains a thrilling, intense and hilariously fun action racer that has many imitators, but no superior. The adrenaline pumping speed and chaos of it all is outstanding.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL GAMES** **2013**

Irrational Games took *BioShock* out of the water and suspended it in the clouds, reaching incredible new heights for the FPS genre in the process. State-of-the-art AI, dazzling world design and an ambitious narrative torn between parallel realities – doused in philosophy, politics and religion – helped establish *BioShock Infinite* as a modern classic. Following a game as universally revered as *BioShock* was never going to be easy, and yet Irrational handled it with real style and grace.



SUPER MARIO 64

DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD** **1996**

As Tim Schafer recently joked with us, it really wasn't until *Super Mario 64* that developers realised that 'tank controls' weren't necessarily the best way to navigate 3D space. The platforming remains incredible and is only made more impressive when you consider it had nothing to go on. It was a true original and remains a fantastic place to explore more than 20 years on.



CIVILIZATION IV

DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS GAMES** **2005**

Civilization IV is an exemplary example of what turn-based strategy games look like when they are running at their very best. Firaxis Games pumped considerable resources into refining its AI systems, overhauling the graphical engine and enhancing the challenge presented to you when attempting to guide a civilisation through the various eras of history. The resulting experience is nothing short of astounding.



PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL** **2003**

It's actually a little difficult to believe just how mind-blowing *Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time* was when it landed in 2003. Every room was a puzzle to be solved; fluid combat and a startlingly satisfying time manipulation mechanic ensure that *Sands Of Time* remains a stunning achievement. A truly sensational 3D action-platformer whose influence is still felt – but never directly replicated – to this day.



ROME: TOTAL WAR

DEVELOPER: **THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY** **2004**

Rome: Total War marked an opportunity for The Creative Assembly to transition the series to full 3D, introducing a higher level of engagement, spectacle and fidelity to play. While some later games in the series have buckled under the complex weave of systems, *Rome* offers restrained and simple strategic play that manages to retain a surprising amount of depth.



STREETS OF RAGE 2

■ DEVELOPER: **SEGA** ■ **1992**

It's one of the best side-scroll fighting games ever made. What else is there to say about *Streets Of Rage 2*, a game that played host to no shortage of good times with its offering of solid combat, vivid graphical presentation, awesome cooperative play and absolutely phenomenal soundtrack. *Streets Of Rage 2* is one of the greatest sequels of all time.



GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

■ DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR NORTH** ■ **2008**

Rockstar grew up. It didn't necessarily leave behind its penchant for violent gunplay or scandalous content, but it knew it needed a better reason for it all than just having fun. Niko's immigrant tale was and is utterly captivating, placing you in impossible positions and driving your mission-to-mission struggle. And some of those missions, like Three Leaf Clover, remain incomparably good.



THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

■ DEVELOPER: **BETHESDA GAME WORKS** ■ **2006**

Oblivion arrived at the right time, just as developers were beginning to explore the power and potential of the seventh generation of home consoles. *Oblivion* was an outstanding achievement, an open-ended RPG cast out across a vibrant systemic world that we could get truly lost in. Everything Bethesda has achieved in the last decade is a direct result of its work here in Cyrodiil.

082

HALO: REACH

■ DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE** ■ **2010**

What a way to go. Developer Bungie bid farewell to the franchise that had made it famous with *Halo: Reach*, a progressive FPS that thrust players into a situation that they could not prevail over. *Reach* pushed Halo's classic action in a new direction, a blistering and breathless act of closure from Bungie after a decade of relentless shock and awe.



BRAID

■ DEVELOPER: **NUMBER NONE** ■ **2008**

It's rare that concept and execution, themes and experience can meld together in such harmony as *Braid* achieves. Its exploration of guilt, forgiveness and penance are reflected within the mechanics and puzzles of the experience, while also not getting in the way of the pure game experience. It owes much to the past, but it pointed us towards the future.



OVERCOOKED

■ DEVELOPER: **GHOST TOWN GAMES** ■ **2016**

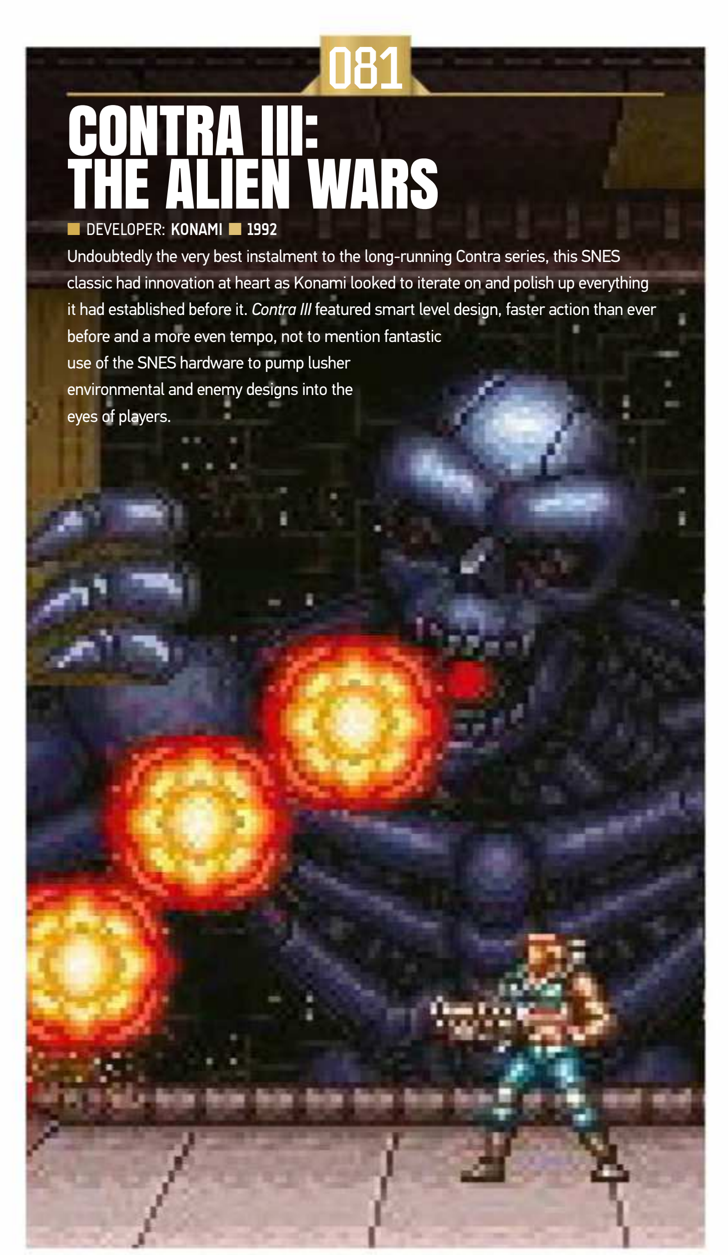
What we love about Ghost Town Games' debut is that the complexity of the experience doesn't come from the mechanics or even really the level design, but from the people playing it. It's a game that demands co-op play, but the more players you add, the more chaotic it can become. Few games have been this approachable and fun.



LEMMINGS

■ DEVELOPER: **DMA DESIGN** ■ **1991**

From the studio that would later give us Grand Theft Auto (it's always worth reminding ourselves of that little trivia nugget), the achievement that keeps this game feeling as relevant now as it did in 1991 is how it imbued the Lemmings with so much personality with so few pixels to build them from. Add in the fantastically designed controls and puzzling and it's a wonderful package.

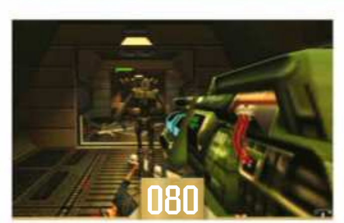


081

CONTRA III: THE ALIEN WARS

■ DEVELOPER: **KONAMI** ■ **1992**

Undoubtedly the very best instalment to the long-running Contra series, this SNES classic had innovation at heart as Konami looked to iterate on and polish up everything it had established before it. *Contra III* featured smart level design, faster action than ever before and a more even tempo, not to mention fantastic use of the SNES hardware to pump lusher environmental and enemy designs into the eyes of players.



080

SYSTEM SHOCK 2

■ DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL GAMES, LOOKING GLASS STUDIOS** ■ **1999**

It was so far ahead of its time when it landed in 1999 that it's a little difficult to comprehend. This hybrid FPS-RPG sought to challenge the very foundations of the genre, enchanting players with its terrifying, atmospheric world, challenging AI, open-ended design and intelligent storytelling. *System Shock 2* remains a masterclass in game design.



079

FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

■ DEVELOPER: **SUBSET GAMES** ■ **2012**

Tasked with escaping from the clutches of federation forces with a small crew aboard a severely underpowered ship, *FTL* is a relentless exercise in damage control – of attempting to survive from one encounter to the next, knowing that one wrong move could set you back hours of progress. It's a sensational time sink and we wouldn't have it any other way.



078

EARTHBOUND

■ DEVELOPER: **HAL LABORATORY, APE INC.** ■ **1994**

EarthBound always felt as if it were being purposefully defiant to industry trends in the RPG space, and that's all a part of its charm. It ditched the ridiculous fantastical elements that were so prevalent in the genre and grounded its story and action in a relatable, modern setting. Sharp writing, stunning twists and super-tight design ensure that *EarthBound* is still a trendsetter.

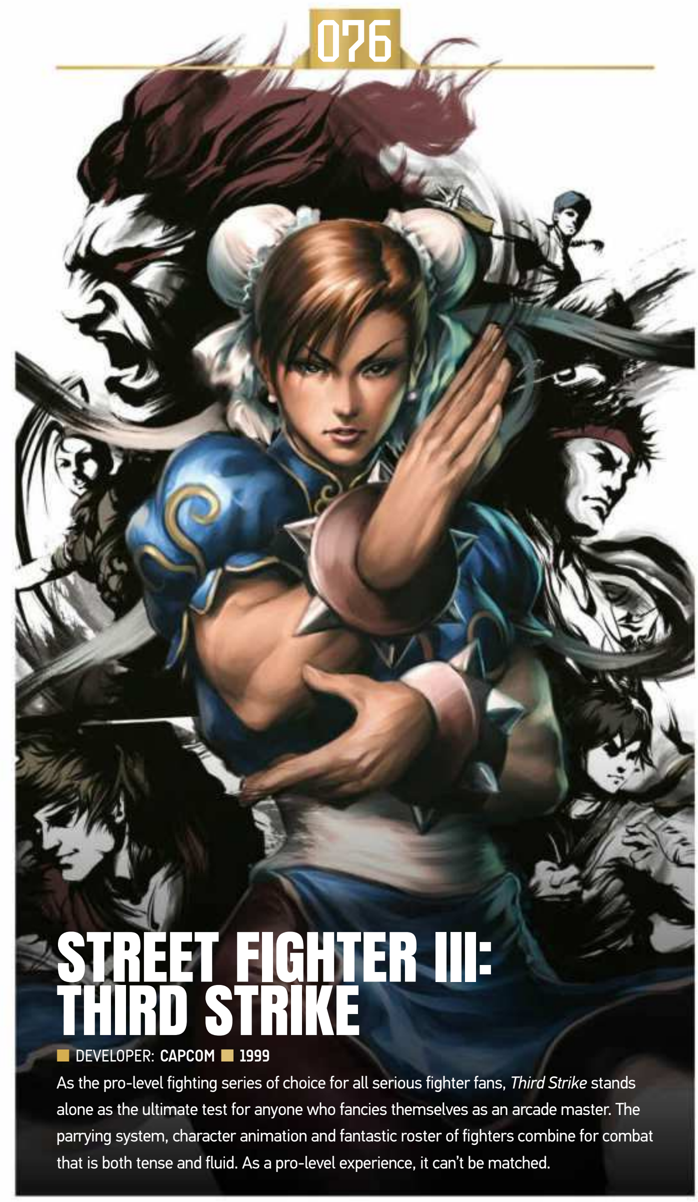


077

FINAL FANTASY TACTICS

■ DEVELOPER: **SQUARESOFT** ■ **1997**

Squaresoft took a huge risk with *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Just as the franchise was beginning to break the West, thanks to the launch of *FF VII*, it goes in chase of a wild spin-off. *Tactics* ditched the series' traditional RPG systems and went all in on an isometric tactical experience. Its stunning depth, consistent challenge and masterful balance helped enshrine it as one of the all-time great strategy games.



076

STREET FIGHTER III: THIRD STRIKE

■ DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** ■ **1999**

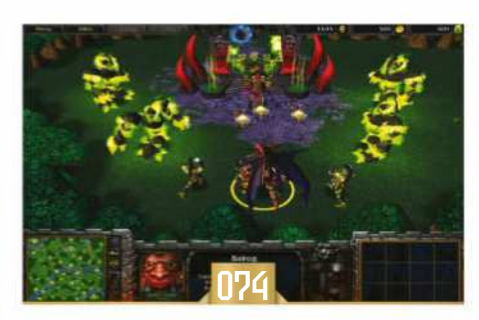
As the pro-level fighting series of choice for all serious fighter fans, *Third Strike* stands alone as the ultimate test for anyone who fancies themselves as an arcade master. The parrying system, character animation and fantastic roster of fighters combine for combat that is both tense and fluid. As a pro-level experience, it can't be matched.



JADE EMPIRE

■ DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE** ■ **2005**

While BioWare is often praised for its work on *KOTOR*, many have a tendency to forget about *Jade Empire*. Imaginative, accessible and truly transformative, *Jade Empire* took the foundation of *KOTOR* and expanded it massively, bringing epic real-time martial arts combat to the fore alongside an expanded morality system, a beautifully realised world, and some truly sumptuous storytelling.



WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS

■ DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT** ■ **2002**

Warcraft III didn't reinvent the strategy genre, but it did come dangerously close to perfecting it. The game struck an incredible balance between its factions and elements, that's something that has helped keep the game alive and well so many years on, that's also allowed it to exist as the backbone to the wave of modern MOBAs.



SUPER BOMBERMAN

■ DEVELOPER: **PRODUCE!** ■ **1993**

Introducing four-player multiplayer to the SNES, thanks to the multitap add-on that shipped with it, *Super Bomberman* was and still remains a chaotic and ridiculously enjoyable game to play with friends. The intensity of the combat, the shifts in the field of play, the potential for short-lived alliances and backstabbing are absolutely brilliant.



GOLDENEYE 007

■ DEVELOPER: **RARE** ■ **1997**

As historically important as *GoldenEye* is in the rise of console shooters, what we continue to love about it is how fun it continues to be in multiplayer. Whether playing four-player split-screen with pistols or two-player with only slaps, it keeps on delivering. And the solo campaign stands among the best action shooter experiences around.



DISHONORED 2

■ DEVELOPER: **ARKANE STUDIOS** ■ **2016**

Dishonored 2 is what happens when a sequel is done right. Arkane Studios improved upon every facet of the original *Dishonored*, answering critics and the community alike. It built upon *Dishonored*'s open structure, along with its level and mission design, to create an experience that doesn't just encourage experimentation, but revels in it. *Dishonored 2* is, to put it simply, a landmark release for the current generation.



LEFT 4 DEAD

■ DEVELOPER: **VALVE SOUTH** ■ **2008**

What an incredible game. In 2008 it looked as if every game was eager to follow in *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*'s steps, chasing the competitive online shooter dream, and then *Left 4 Dead* arrived and threw caution to the wind. It's the perfect co-op shooter; the intelligent, emergent AI system ensuring that every playthrough is a different challenge to be had, keeping the maps fresh for players indefinitely.



ALIEN: ISOLATION

■ DEVELOPER: **CREATIVE ASSEMBLY** ■ **2014**

Developers have spent decades attempting to authentically capture the spirit of the Alien franchise in a videogame, wrestling with its suffocating atmosphere and tempered pacing. And then *Alien: Isolation* came along, a true survival horror experience that perfectly encapsulated why it is that we fell in love with the IP to begin with. Creative Assembly's masterpiece is bold, terrifying and utterly breathtaking in equal measure.



FINAL FANTASY VII

DEVELOPER: **SQUARESOFT** ■ **1997**

Final Fantasy VII is often credited with not only bringing the long-running series to a mainstream Western audience, but bringing the entire JRPG genre with it. It was a huge success – one of the biggest of the PlayStation era. A deep story, memorable characters and incredible scenario design ensures that *Final Fantasy VII* remains a fan favourite that never seems to lose its lustre.



HORIZON ZERO DAWN

DEVELOPER: **GUERRILLA GAMES** ■ **2017**

We were confident that Guerrilla would create a gorgeous open world and perhaps even some fine third-person combat, but we were not prepared for this. A gorgeously paced, written and performed story, a lead character who has catapulted into our top ten of all time and a piece of worldbuilding that Bethesda would be proud of. An instant classic.



WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

DEVELOPER: **GIANT SPARROW** ■ **2017**

Giant Sparrow's second game raised the bar for storytelling in videogames. It funnelled its narrative through short vignettes, giving us a window into the trials and tribulations of the Finch family. Over 30 different intuitive control schemes interlinked with beautiful narrative framing, the result was a moving and arresting piece of interactive storytelling that won't be forgotten.

062

PORTAL 2

DEVELOPER: **VALVE CORPORATION** ■ **2011**

We put a portal on the moon, guys! Did you see that!? Okay, we'll calm ourselves for a moment, but seriously, while bigger may not always be better, it can certainly be a lot of fun and that's what *Portal 2* delivered. It brought us deeper into the world of Aperture Science, closer to GLaDOS and gave us some great puzzles along the way.



MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 2: NEW AGE OF HEROES

DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** ■ **2000**

With a giant roster of characters – three times larger than its predecessor – and a refined and balanced approach to the main proficiencies, *Marvel Vs. Capcom 2* fast established itself as a truly excellent 2D fighter. Simplified controls and a fresh character assist system ensured it would be welcoming to beginners, though none of these additions took anything away from the deep competitive play at its core.



BASTION

DEVELOPER: **SUPERGIANT GAMES** ■ **2011**

Bastion is an adventure worth taking. With its immersive fantasy world and tempered pacing, it feels as if you're dipping your toes into some forgotten children's adventure. It impresses with its sharp, smart storytelling – driven by a dynamic narrator that makes the game feel as if it was designed for you alone. *Bastion* has inspired a wave of creativity and innovation throughout the burgeoning independent scene.



ADVANCE WARS

DEVELOPER: **INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS** ■ **2001**

It's a wonder how such ingenuity was packed into a cartridge so small. *Advance Wars* is a turn-based strategy masterpiece; the adorable graphical presentation helped offset the punishing difficulty of the campaign. Every one of your units and every square of the terrain was but a piece of a broader puzzle, ensuring that every battle won felt like a thrilling victory won in earnest.



GOD OF WAR II

■ DEVELOPER: **SCE SANTA MONICA STUDIO** ■ **2007**

Kratos in many ways represents a very particular era of the games industry. A petulant teenage era, perhaps, with his penchant for ultraviolence and a burning rage that can't be sated. *God Of War II* managed to set that against some incredible challenges, bosses and the tightest possible gameplay mechanics. And what an opening sequence! Films wish they could be this epic.



PAC-MAN: CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

■ DEVELOPER: **NAMCO BANDAI GAMES** ■ **2007**

It took 27 years for *Pac-Man* to evolve into its ultimate form. *Championship Edition* is one of the most moreish videogames ever created, taking the traditional Pac-Man experience and ratcheting up the energy of it in every way conceivable. It's a speedy, hedonistic assault on the senses that's near-impossible to put down once you get started.



GEARS OF WAR

■ DEVELOPER: **EPIC GAMES** ■ **2006**

The videogame industry owes *Gears Of War* a debt of gratitude. As the primary showcase for Epic's generation defining Unreal Engine 3, *Gears Of War* helped usher in a new benchmark of graphical excellence in the era of HD gaming. It also reinvented the third-person action/shooter, helping to popularise the use of cover as a central mechanic – something that's now standardised across the industry.

058

QUAKE III: ARENA

■ DEVELOPER: **ID SOFTWARE** ■ **1999**

In many respects, we wouldn't be where we are today with competitive gaming and esports was it not for *Quake III: Arena*. Shipping without a traditional single-player campaign, *Arena* was a focused, furious twitch shooter with outstanding level design, memorable weapons and a curiously awesome set of advanced movement features that have now become a staple of the broader 'arena shooter' genre.



THE OREGON TRAIL

■ DEVELOPER: **MECC** ■ **1971**

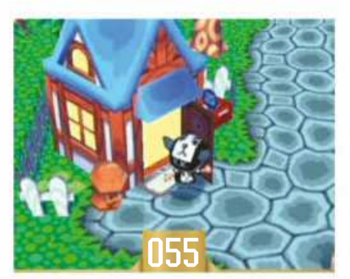
If you're of a certain age, there's a fairly good chance that you are intimately familiar with *The Oregon Trail*. It's the game that effectively broke into schools, gamifying learning and teaching kids about American history whilst punishing them for almost every decision made along the way. *The Oregon Trail* can be a challenging nightmare, but it's also stupidly entertaining every single time you play it.



SUPER MARIO BROS.

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO** ■ **1985**

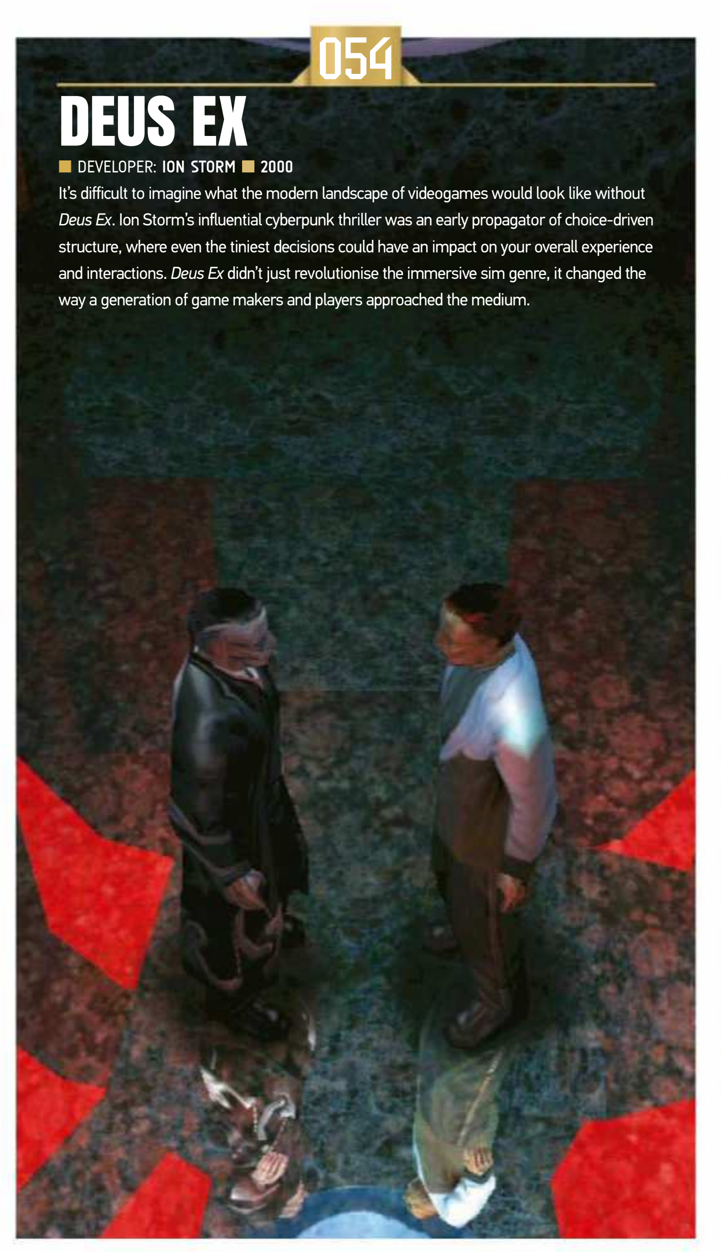
Iconic hero. Iconic music. Iconic gameplay. Iconic level design. *Super Mario Bros*. didn't break moulds, it made them. This game set the bar for 2D platforming action for all time with its fantastically crafted learning curve, wide level variety and well-hidden secrets. The jaw-dropping revelation of running along the top of a level still can't be beaten for first-time players. A true original.



ANIMAL CROSSING

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD** ■ **2001**

Faced with a sizable mortgage to pay off, you're forced to become creative in a town populated by adorable animals. *Animal Crossing*'s use of the GameCube's internal clock to portray a realistic passage of time was excellent, though it will always be remembered for the way in which it gamified busywork into an engaging, exquisite videogame. *Animal Crossing* was the preparation for adulthood that schooling never provided.

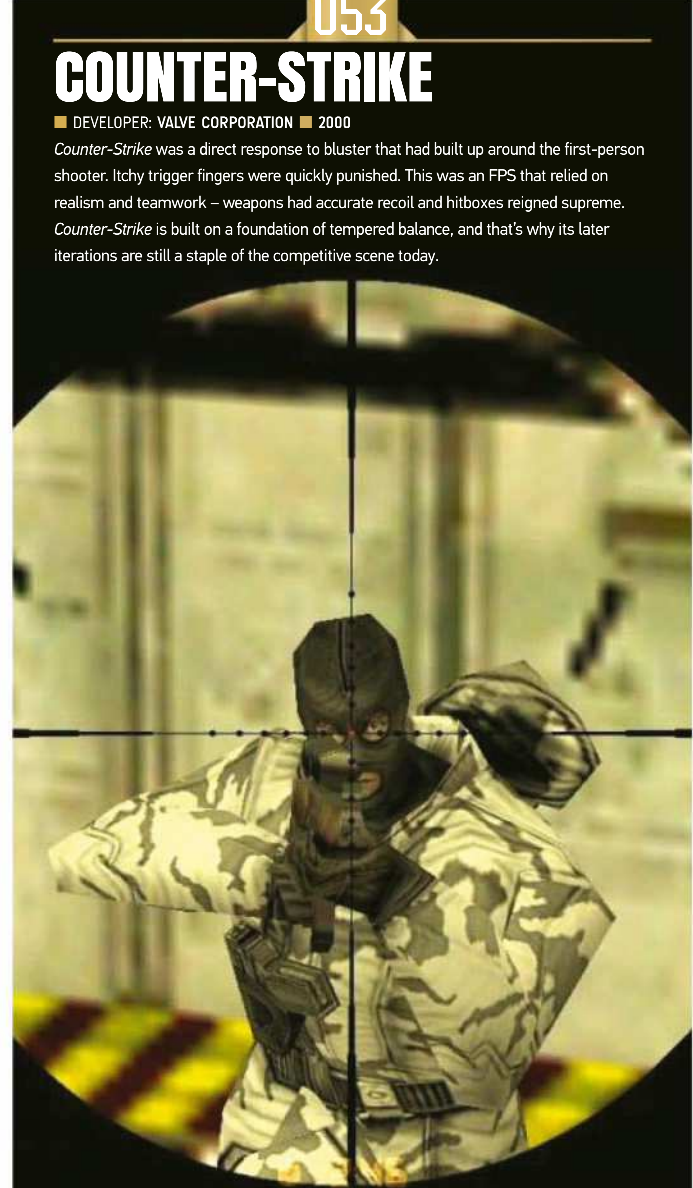


054

DEUS EX

■ DEVELOPER: **ION STORM** ■ **2000**

It's difficult to imagine what the modern landscape of videogames would look like without *Deus Ex*. Ion Storm's influential cyberpunk thriller was an early propagator of choice-driven structure, where even the tiniest decisions could have an impact on your overall experience and interactions. *Deus Ex* didn't just revolutionise the immersive sim genre, it changed the way a generation of game makers and players approached the medium.



053

COUNTER-STRIKE

■ DEVELOPER: **VALVE CORPORATION** ■ **2000**

Counter-Strike was a direct response to bluster that had built up around the first-person shooter. Itchy trigger fingers were quickly punished. This was an FPS that relied on realism and teamwork – weapons had accurate recoil and hitboxes reigned supreme. *Counter-Strike* is built on a foundation of tempered balance, and that's why its later iterations are still a staple of the competitive scene today.



052

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

■ DEVELOPER: **BLACK ISLE STUDIOS** ■ **1999**

When it comes to computer role-playing games, there's still nothing that really holds a candle to Black Isle's stunning and meticulously crafted outing. In an age when game writing was beginning to reach for something more ambitious, *Planescape* was lightyears ahead of its time with the kind of dark, twisted, funny and rewarding narratives we now expect far more often.



051

DONKEY KONG

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO R&D 1** ■ **1981**

It was the game that put Shigeru Miyamoto on the map, which should be reason enough to grant it a place in the greatest of all time, but the wonderful thing about *Donkey Kong* is that it's still a hell of a lot of fun to play. The mountain climb of working your way up each level only to be sent to the next height is the kind of simple and rewarding progression that many games can still only dream of.



050

METROID PRIME

■ DEVELOPER: **RETRO STUDIOS** ■ **2002**

Many never believed that Metroid would work in first-person. And in many ways, Retro Studios pulled off the impossible with *Metroid Prime*, a groundbreaking experience that retained all of the elements that made the series so adored to begin with. It incentivised exploration and inaction, leading players to investigate every nook and cranny of the incredible world that lay before them.

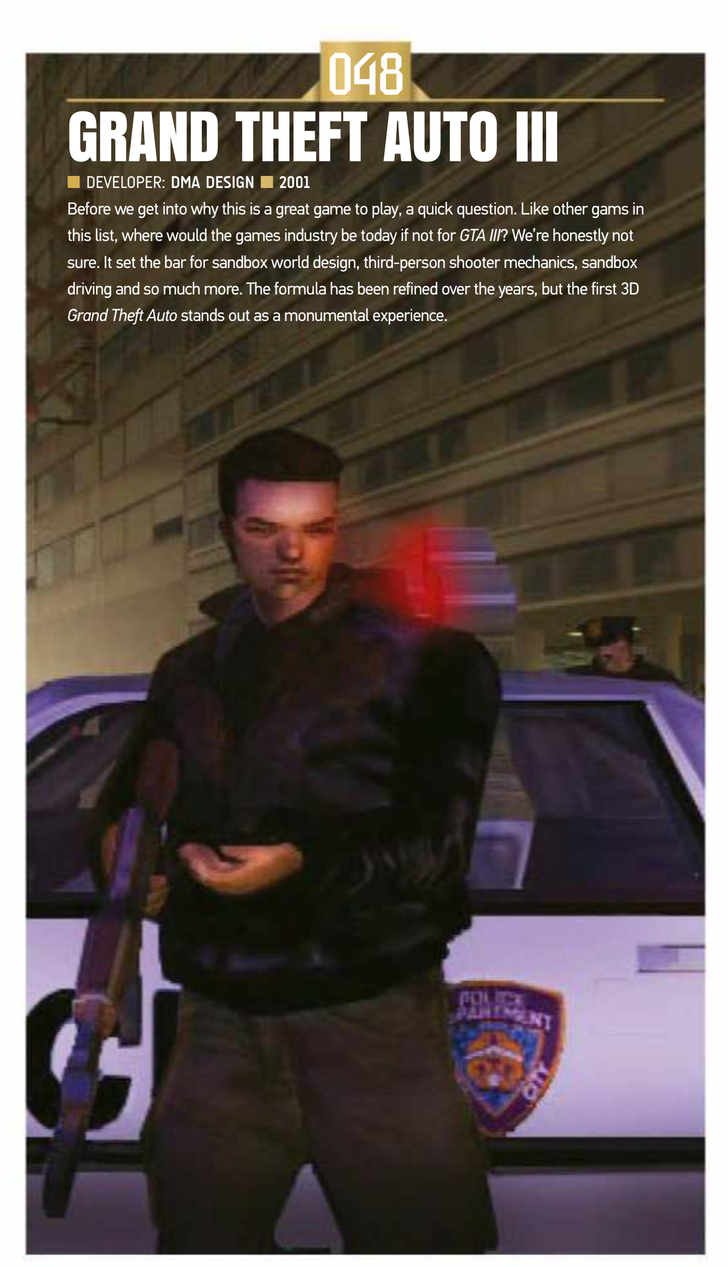


049

SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD** ■ **2002**

For many, this had been a long time coming. *Super Mario Sunshine* had to follow *Mario 64*, a task many saw as impossible, yet it managed to carve out its own space to play. *Sunshine* is a bright and ingenious adventure game. A vast array of new moves, powered by the addition of the FLUDD backpack as a starring mechanic, allowed Nintendo to build some of the coolest stages Mario had ever found himself lost in.



GRAND THEFT AUTO III

DEVELOPER: **DMA DESIGN** **2001**

Before we get into why this is a great game to play, a quick question. Like other gams in this list, where would the games industry be today if not for *GTA III*? We're honestly not sure. It set the bar for sandbox world design, third-person shooter mechanics, sandbox driving and so much more. The formula has been refined over the years, but the first 3D *Grand Theft Auto* stands out as a monumental experience.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER

DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD** **2002**

While it was derided for its (frankly, sumptuous) cel-shaded graphics, *The Wind Waker* is a masterpiece. It's expressive and heartfelt, painting its world across a vivid canvas in a way that we had never seen before its release. The action, camera and controls were given an overhaul, too, ensuring this was more intuitive and engaging than any 3D Zelda that had come before it.



SILENT HILL 2

DEVELOPER: **KONAMI** **2001**

Disarming. That's perhaps the best word to describe Konami's seminal psychological assault on the senses. *Silent Hill 2* might have evoked terror in the hearts and mind of anybody brave enough to give it a try, but it certainly wasn't afraid to tackle and explore difficult subject matters. A complex, nuanced story combined wonderfully with claustrophobic environments and some truly legendary scenario and enemy design.



SUPER MARIO KART

DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD**

2000

You can keep your torque, leather seat stitching and weather effects; give us banana skins, red shells and lightning bolts every day of the week. *Super Mario Kart* is racing action at its simplest and sometimes silliest and that's a combination we can't get enough of. There's no such thing as a bad *Mario Kart*, but the one that started it all is best.



FINAL FANTASY VIII

DEVELOPER: **SQUARESOFT** **1999**

From its incredible visual presentation to its unforgettable soundtrack; the complex cast of characters and deep narrative to its majestic battle system, *Final Fantasy VIII* is one of the all-time great JRPGs – reinventing the series in a wildly impressive fashion. Everybody has their favourite *Final Fantasy*, but the sheer ingenuity and imagination on display throughout ensures that this entry is always near the top of the list.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

DEVELOPER: **SONIC TEAM** **1991**

There's a reason why we keep chasing after the elusive thrill of this original *Sonic The Hedgehog* with every passing sequel; the incredible speed, colour and level design of the game was like nothing else. The swagger and attitude have been morphed and moulded over the years, but this is the Sonic we always come back to as a reminder of what truly great speed platforming is about.



THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND

■ DEVELOPER: **LUCASFILM GAMES** ■ **1990**

Videogames have often struggled with comedy. That's part of what makes LucasFilm's *The Secret Of Monkey Island* so damned delightful; the characters, the situations and the text are hilarious throughout. Couple that tone and energy with a gorgeous presentation, smooth controls and hours of brilliantly conceived puzzles and you'll find that *Monkey Island* is one of the all-time great graphic-adventure games.



DEAD SPACE 2

■ DEVELOPER: **VISCERAL GAMES** ■ **2011**

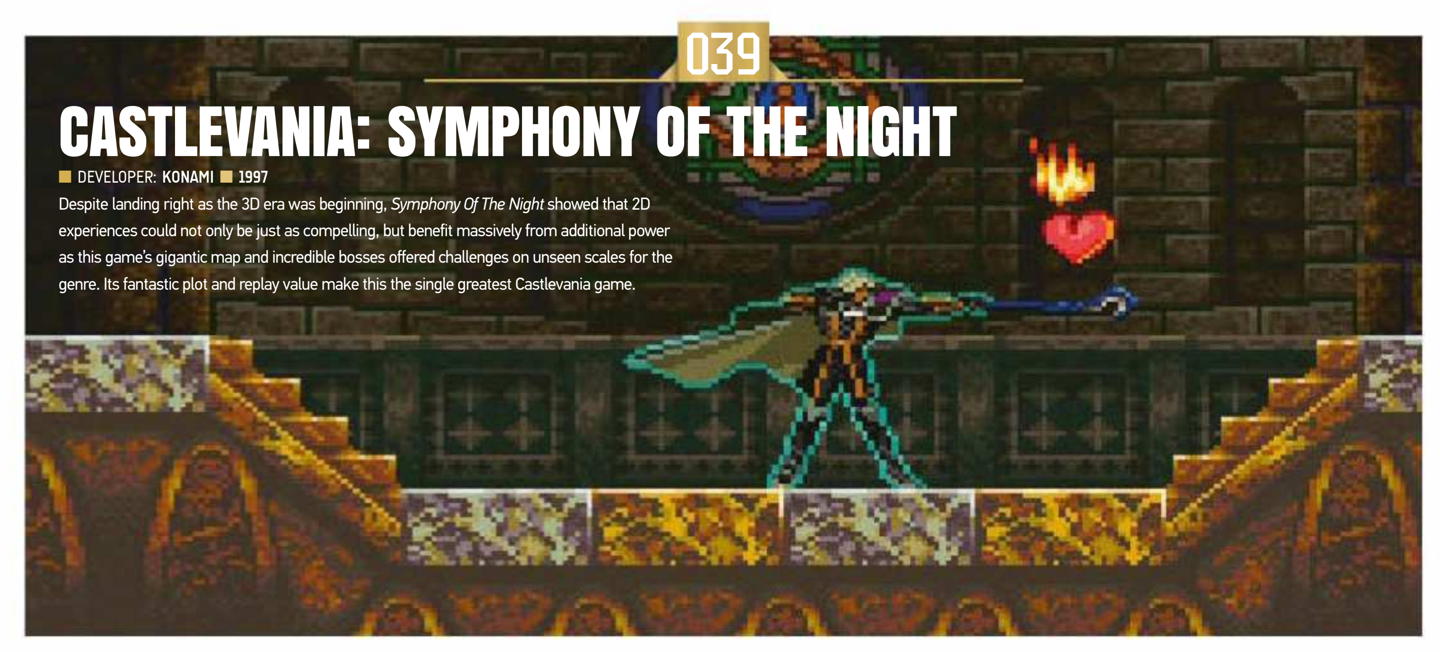
games™ awarded *Dead Space 2* a 10/10 back in issue 106, and for good reason too. Visceral Games reinvented the survival horror genre and unequivocally defined it in an instant with this bloody and brutal assault on the senses. *Dead Space 2* is intense, innovative and fosters a truly terrifying atmosphere. It's an incredible achievement of action and horror that developers are still trying to replicate today.



THE SIMS 2

■ DEVELOPER: **MAXIS** ■ **2004**

The Sims 2 is one of the best-selling PC games of all time. It all comes back to the accessibility and endless replayability that runs to the heart of Maxis' incredible life simulator. This sequel was a huge improvement over the original, offering six stages of life to guide your sims through, awesome graphical fidelity, and a level of realism, depth and detail that no contender has ever been able to match.



CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT

■ DEVELOPER: **KONAMI** ■ **1997**

Despite landing right as the 3D era was beginning, *Symphony Of The Night* showed that 2D experiences could not only be just as compelling, but benefit massively from additional power as this game's gigantic map and incredible bosses offered challenges on unseen scales for the genre. Its fantastic plot and replay value make this the single greatest Castlevania game.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EPD** ■ **2017**

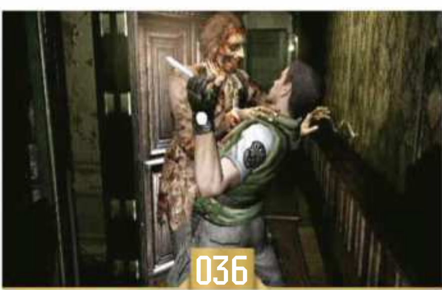
Proving once again, as Nintendo often does, that doing something the best is more important than doing it first, *Breath Of The Wild* brought open-world sandbox play to the Zelda series in a way that made many who had attempted similar styles in the past look like they had been fumbling in the dark. Hyrule has never been more awe-inspiring than this.



STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

■ DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE** ■ **2003**

KOTOR gave us an intimate look at the Force, taking us 4,000 years before the formation of the Galactic Empire in which the Jedi and Sith are locked in a vicious battle. This choice-driven RPG is full of sensational twists and turns, and offered a then-unprecedented opportunity to shape your own experience thanks to a well-utilised morality system and suite of Force powers.



RESIDENT EVIL

■ DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** ■ **1996**

Resident Evil is survival horror. While it was by no means the first game to tackle the genre, it did come to define it. Limited resources, sparsely located save rooms, and the use of a fixed camera to create a sense of overbearing, suffocating claustrophobia in a zombie-filled mansion all helped establish its legend. Capcom outdid itself with the 2002 GameCube remake, too; it's a must-play.



JOURNEY

■ DEVELOPER: **THATGAMECOMPANY** ■ **2012**

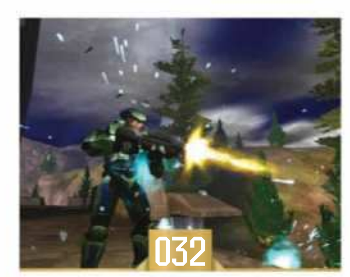
It's strange for the turn, the truly breathtaking or mind-bending moment, of a videogame to be in its credits, but in some ways that's true of *Journey*. The experience of exploring and delving deeper into this world was a thrill on its own, but learning the ways in which that experience was embellished by other players adds something special to the formula.



BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

■ DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS** ■ **2009**

Before *Batman: Arkham Asylum* arrived on the scene, games bearing a superhero license were a trash fire. But then this is no ordinary superhero game; *Arkham Asylum* struck the perfect balance between power and fragility, truly putting players behind the cowl for the very first time. Stunning, expressive combat, excellent stealth, brilliant level design and a wonderful script all ensured that *Arkham Asylum* would set a new standard for action games.



HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

■ DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE** ■ **2001**

Where would we be without *Halo*? It's the game that put Microsoft on the map, establishing the Xbox as a hardcore console for hardcore gamers; a game that proved the FPS could succeed on console. Bungie unleashed a shooter with an unprecedented level of scale. *Halo*'s huge cinematic action, pixel perfect controls and thunderous pacing redefined gaming's most popular genre.

035

SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EPD** ■ **2017**

Like a greatest hits album that adds new tracks that are actually as good as the band's very best. *Super Mario Odyssey* manages to be a distillation of everything great about 3D Mario games while also bringing in new gameplay mechanics and challenges that make it a joy to play through from start to finish. The post-game hunt for moons is as good as the main experience.



DIABLO II

■ DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD NORTH** ■ **2000**

Blizzard really nailed it on this one. While *Diablo* was a huge success for the company its fan base was extremely clear in what it wanted from a sequel – it wanted more, *a lot more*. That would be *Diablo II* then, the game that is no doubt responsible for breaking thousands of mice over the years through its endlessly replayable hack and slash action.



STREET FIGHTER II TURBO: HYPER FIGHTING

■ DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** ■ **1992**

Of the many incarnations and evolutions of *Street Fighter II*, this is the one we come back to over and over. Its faster action and inclusion of the bosses as playable characters without compromising the sound quality or crispness of the combat (as happened with other conversions) made this the finest example of the fighter. The multiplayer experience remains as good now as it ever was.



DOOM

■ DEVELOPER: **ID SOFTWARE** ■ **1993**

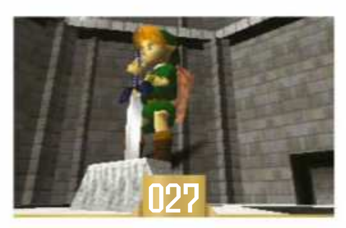
This is pure speculation on our part, but there's a very good chance that the videogame industry would not be where it is today were it not for the huge, unprecedented success of *Doom*. It's one of the most talked about games of all time, a landmark shooter that drove innovation across the industry and changed the face of gaming forever.



INSIDE

■ DEVELOPER: **PLAYDEAD** ■ **2016**

The unfolding mystery of *Inside* is what plants a figurative bug in our brains (as opposed to the digital bugs of Playhead's previous game, *Limbo*) as *Inside* managed to portray a dark, dystopian world in such simple and devastating ways, gradually unfolding into something even stranger and more complex. Its weirdly triumphant final moments are the cherry on this rich cake.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD** ■ **1998**

Some of the wow-factor of stepping out into Hyrule for the first time in this game may have faded a little, but time has not aged this extraordinary RPG. Its innovative control scheme still holds up well and its wonderful world is full of fantastic dungeon design and mechanics. Zelda in 3D has gone bigger, but it may never get any better than this.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SUBSISTENCE

■ DEVELOPER: **KONAMI** ■ **2005**

Metal Gear Solid 3 was a departure from the series' long-established conventions, but by dragging the stealth-action out of isolated structures and out into the rainforest Konami was able to deliver a seminal action game. It is bold and ambitious in its design and execution; a layered and complex political thriller that fires on all cylinders from start to finish.



RED DEAD REDEMPTION

■ DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES** ■ **2010**

Red Dead Redemption is one of the most sublime open world games ever created. Rockstar seemed to effortlessly create a sense of time and place the likes of which we hadn't experienced before – not on this scale. The use of music, the visual fidelity, and the improved controls and physics over *GTA* ensured that this wasn't some mere clone, but a fully realised, exciting and distinct experience.



SUPER MARIO WORLD

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD** ■ **1990**

Within every generation there is a Mario game that appears to embody everything that is best about that era and *Super Mario World* is exactly that for the age of 16-bit. Incredible sprite design, gorgeous worlds, tight and satisfying controls, wonderful music and brilliant level design all make this one of the very best platformers ever made.



CHRONO TRIGGER

■ DEVELOPER: **SQUARE** ■ **1995**

It's rare that two powerhouses of development can come together and actually meld their philosophies in such a way as to not diminish the other and yet that's what was achieved when the development teams of Final Fantasy met Dragon Quest and birthed *Chrono Trigger*. Its time-jumping story remains utterly thrilling and mind-bending.


022

BLOODBORNE

■ DEVELOPER: **FROMSOFTWARE** ■ **2015**

If *Demon's Souls* established a template of pain and punishment; if *Dark Souls* streamlined the systems and took them global; then *Bloodborne* is the glorious culmination of six years of dutiful iteration and evolution. This gothic nightmare features ingeniously designed boss battles, balanced combat and one of the coolest and most atmospheric gothic spaces ever presented in a videogame.


021

HALF-LIFE 2

■ DEVELOPER: **VALVE CORPORATION** ■ **2004**

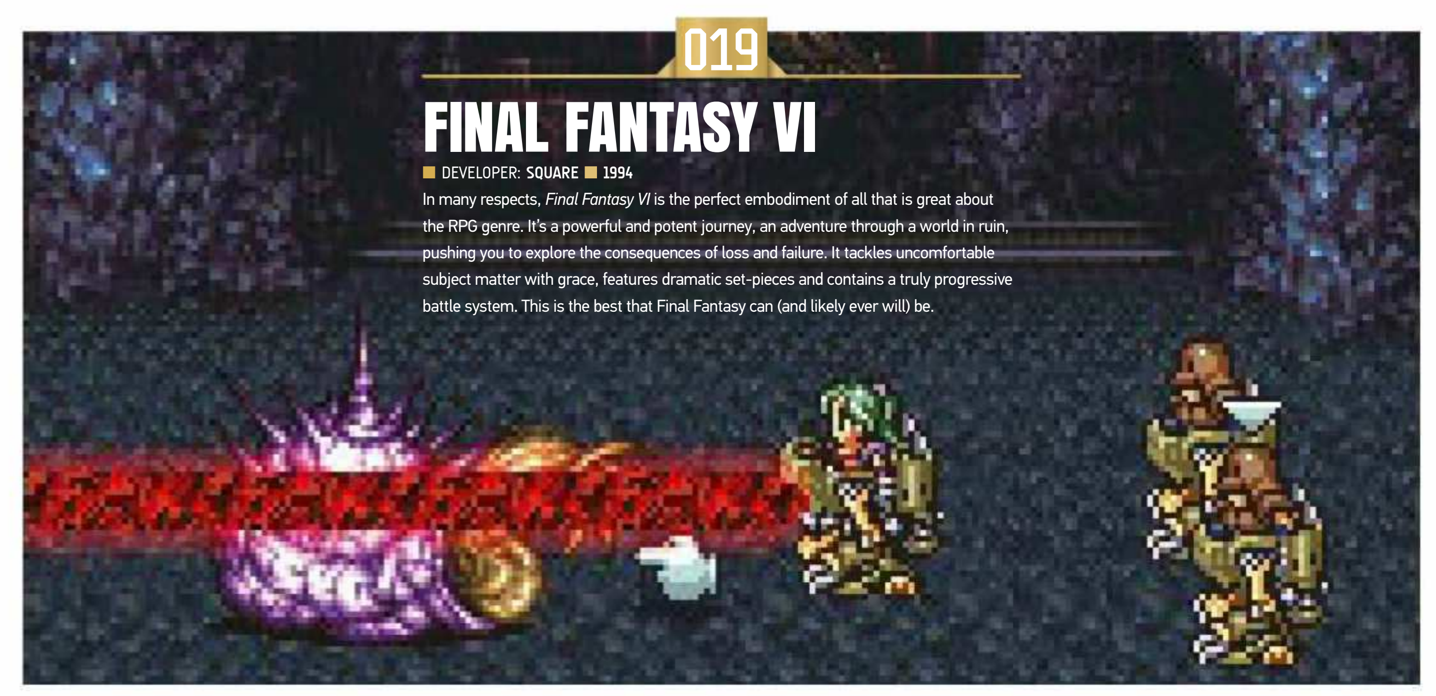
It's hard to separate the quality of *Half-Life 2* and its episodic extensions, so for the sake of ease we consider them here as a single whole; three chapters of one story. And what a story. Rebellion, science and a fight for survival combine in one of the most expertly crafted stories in gaming history. That so few FPS games have ever attempted to imitate it speaks to how hard that would be to achieve.


020

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

■ DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR NORTH** ■ **2013**

Three characters, one sprawling metropolis: Rockstar showed once again that it is simply the best developer out there at establishing a world and handing the keys over to us as players. The main story of *GTA V* was a classic action romp, but GTA Online has turned it into something else entirely. As many times as this series has been a phenomenon, this is its greatest achievement.


019

FINAL FANTASY VI

■ DEVELOPER: **SQUARE** ■ **1994**

In many respects, *Final Fantasy VI* is the perfect embodiment of all that is great about the RPG genre. It's a powerful and potent journey, an adventure through a world in ruin, pushing you to explore the consequences of loss and failure. It tackles uncomfortable subject matter with grace, features dramatic set-pieces and contains a truly progressive battle system. This is the best that Final Fantasy can (and likely ever will) be.


018

STARCRAFT

■ DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT** ■ **1998**

There's a reason that, for many across the globe, competitive gaming is synonymous with *StarCraft*. It's all because of that balance; *StarCraft* featured three races, and the balance struck between them completely revolutionised the space. The tactical opportunity, breadth of supported play styles, and sheer opportunity to unleash shock and awe ensures that *StarCraft* will never lose its appeal.


017

THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT

■ DEVELOPER: **CD PROJEKT RED** ■ **2015**

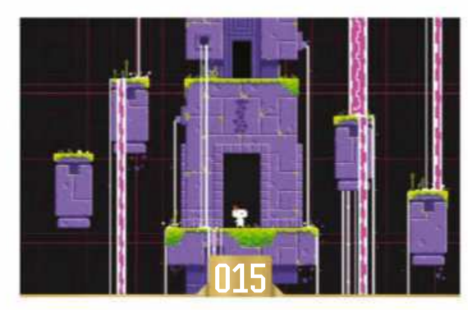
As fantasy worlds go, The Witcher's has a dark, malevolent heart, but through its stoic and sometimes playful lead, it manages to bridge the divide between high-fantasy and relatable humanity. And that its missions and branching narratives reflect that too in *The Witcher III* is why it stands out as one of the greatest RPG experiences ever created.


016

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

■ DEVELOPER: **SCE JAPAN STUDIO, TEAM ICO** ■ **2005**

By distilling the broader, perhaps even scattershot and sprawling, aspects of 3D open world design that had been building for a decade into 16 epic boss fights, *Shadow Of The Colossus* managed to construct a game that was both immensely challenging and utterly captivating without having to say a single word. And its recent remake only helped remind us how much we adore it.



FEZ

■ DEVELOPER: **POLYTRON CORPORATION** ■ **2012**

Wickedly inventive. How else can you describe *Fez*, a game that unequivocally exists in a league of its own? A mind-bending puzzle-platformer that revels in the obtuse and extraordinary, its challenges drawn out across wonderfully intuitive 2D spaces in a fully three-dimensional world. It's a game about gaining perspective through discovery and freedom, an esoteric adventure that's best explored when you're blind to its mysteries and depth.



BIOSHOCK

■ DEVELOPER: **2K BOSTON** ■ **2007**

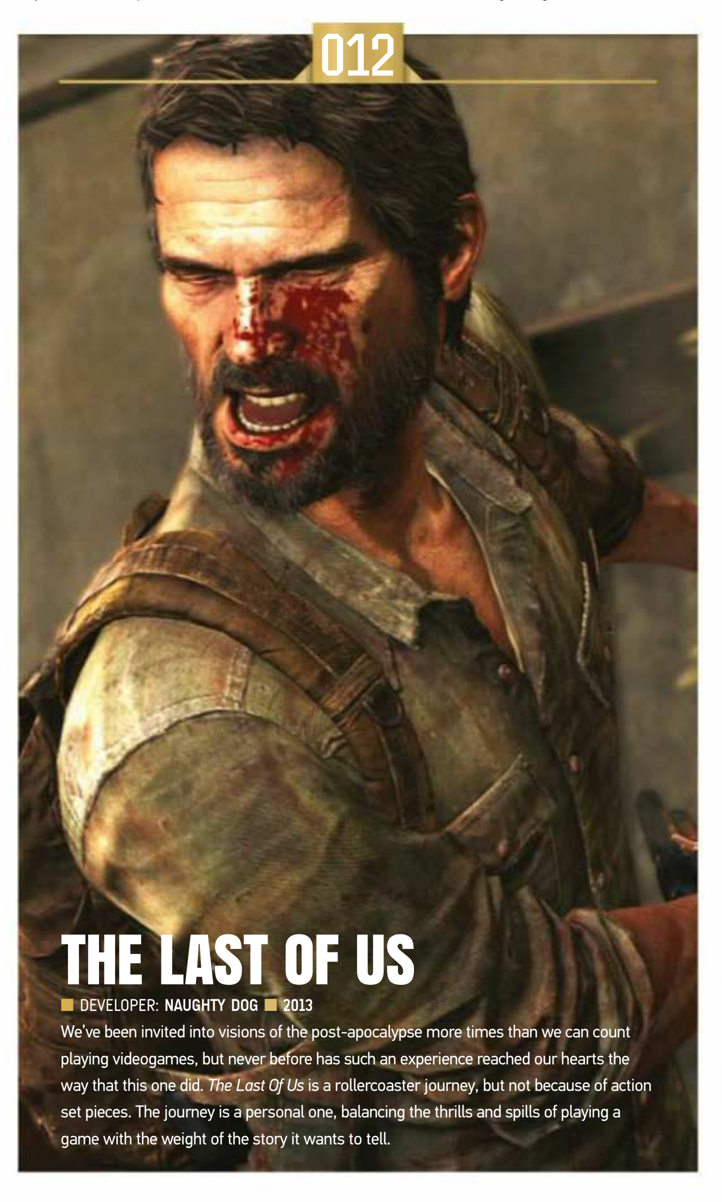
"Would you kindly". Three incredibly powerful words that managed to turn the conventions of first-person shooter gameplay (and beyond) on their heads and turn it into an exploration of free will and self-determination. *BioShock* made playing a shooter into a philosophical journey, which had been touched on before, but never quite so beautifully or with such glorious decor. Rapture truly is one of the wonders of the gaming world.



MASS EFFECT 2

■ DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE** ■ **2010**

Perhaps the biggest trick BioWare pulled off with its Mass Effect series was managing to balance out the establishment of a firm personality for its hero, Commander Shepard, while also allowing us as players to dictate their actions and to a large extent their personalities. Shepard is both well-defined and a cypher for our own motivations through the game. And in *Mass Effect 2* it extended that out into the relationships you keep with your incredible crew.



THE LAST OF US

■ DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG** ■ **2013**

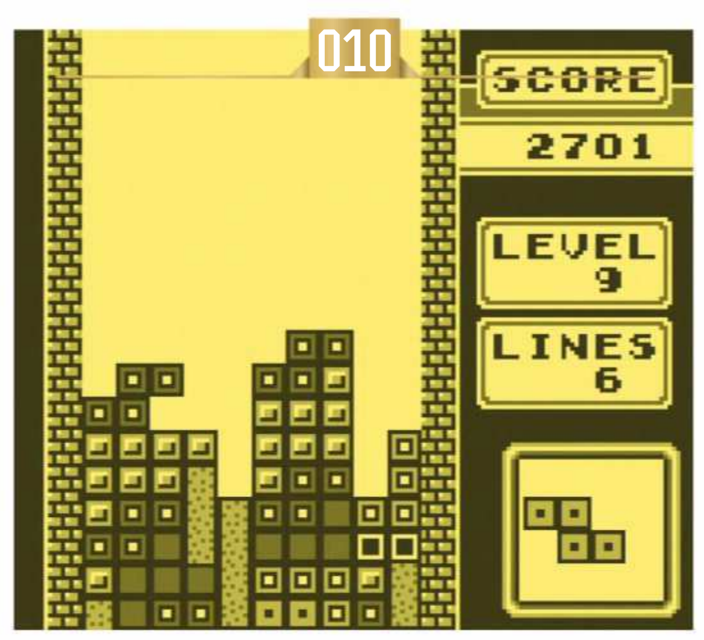
We've been invited into visions of the post-apocalypse more times than we can count playing videogames, but never before has such an experience reached our hearts the way that this one did. *The Last Of Us* is a rollercoaster journey, but not because of action set pieces. The journey is a personal one, balancing the thrills and spills of playing a game with the weight of the story it wants to tell.



SUPER METROID

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO R&D1, INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS** ■ **1994**

From its full tilt cold open to the closing boss battle, *Super Metroid* feels relentless. It sends you deep into the darkest corners of Zebes, gradually growing more and more powerful and skilled as you go, bringing together the best elements of Mario and Zelda as this series has always done, but now with far greater confidence and technical prowess. And what an incredibly atmospheric game it manages to portray through its 16-bit visuals and stunning sound design.



TETRIS

■ DEVELOPER: **VARIOUS** ■ **1984**

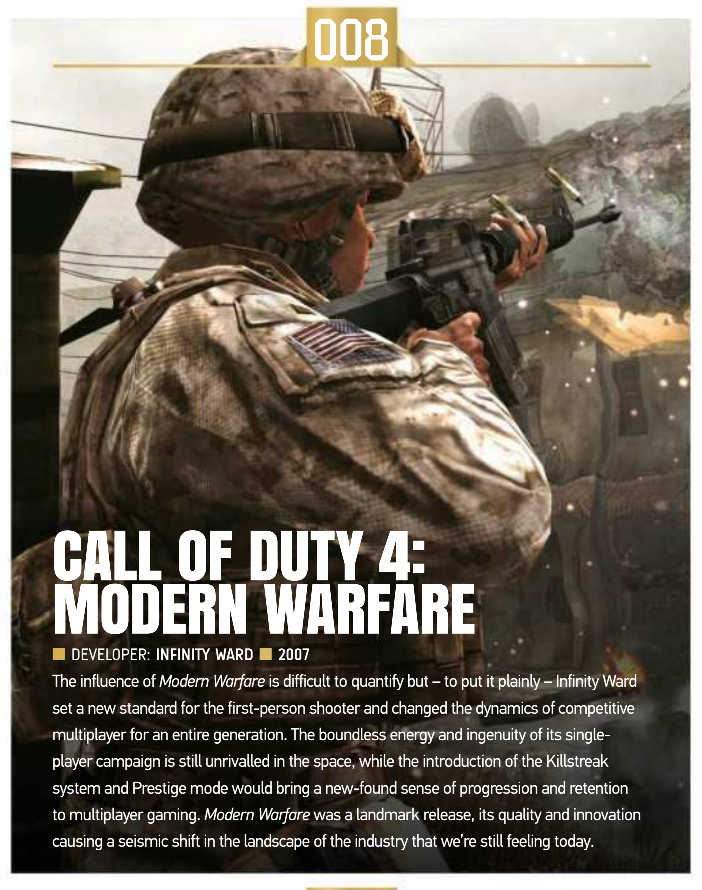
We would be hard pressed to tell you exactly what the best version of *Tetris* is from the myriad releases it has enjoyed, but to some extent that speaks to the sheer brilliance and approachability of the core loop of the experience as designed by Alexey Pajitnov in the USSR. Its Game Boy release in 1989 does draw focus, however, for the way it burrowed into our minds, portability working hand in hand with its simple block dropping mechanics. It has had many imitators, but it's never been beaten. Simply the best pure puzzler ever made.



WORLD OF WARCRAFT

■ DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT** ■ **2004**

World Of Warcraft continues to be the MMORPG that all contenders are compared to and measured against, 14 years on from the day that millions first swarmed to Azeroth. It's so much more than a videogame; it's a social experience, a shared reality in which friendships are forged in the throes of battle – where hours are wasted away in pursuit of mastery across its weave of disciplines. *World Of Warcraft* will forever be praised for its incredible open world, long-running quests and for fostering a passionate community that refuses to let the game fade from relevance.



CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

■ DEVELOPER: **INFINITY WARD** ■ **2007**

The influence of *Modern Warfare* is difficult to quantify but – to put it plainly – Infinity Ward set a new standard for the first-person shooter and changed the dynamics of competitive multiplayer for an entire generation. The boundless energy and ingenuity of its single-player campaign is still unrivalled in the space, while the introduction of the Killstreak system and Prestige mode would bring a new-found sense of progression and retention to multiplayer gaming. *Modern Warfare* was a landmark release, its quality and innovation causing a seismic shift in the landscape of the industry that we're still feeling today.



RESIDENT EVIL 4

■ DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** ■ **2005**

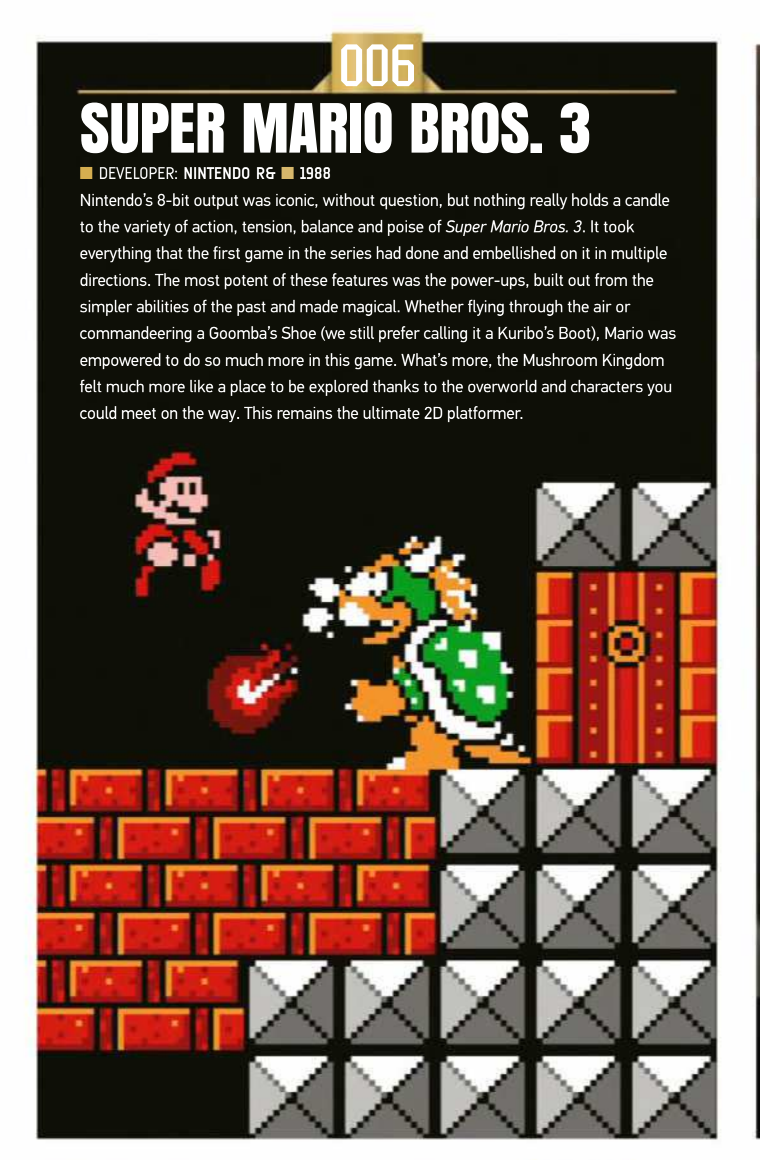
Resident Evil 4 revolutionised third-person action games, laying the groundwork for titles such as Gears Of War and Uncharted to carry the baton forward in the years to come. Capcom's mad reinvention of its famed survival-horror series gave us so much, with that tight over-the-shoulder camera inducing awesome scenes of frantic action. *Resident Evil 4*'s attention to detail was mesmerising; immense quality poured into every one of its assets and scenarios. Its ability to get the adrenaline pumping at the first sign of trouble is as wildly impressive today as it was in 2005.

006

SUPER MARIO BROS. 3

■ DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO R&D4** ■ **1988**

Nintendo's 8-bit output was iconic, without question, but nothing really holds a candle to the variety of action, tension, balance and poise of *Super Mario Bros. 3*. It took everything that the first game in the series had done and embellished on it in multiple directions. The most potent of these features was the power-ups, built out from the simpler abilities of the past and made magical. Whether flying through the air or commandeering a Goomba's Shoe (we still prefer calling it a Kuribo's Boot), Mario was empowered to do so much more in this game. What's more, the Mushroom Kingdom felt much more like a place to be explored thanks to the overworld and characters you could meet on the way. This remains the ultimate 2D platformer.



005



UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

■ DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG** ■ **2009**

Is it strange to say that one of the most exemplary things about Nathan Drake's second outing is its narrative structure? In a game with such incredible action set pieces, world design, performances and third-person combat, it's very hard for us to think about it without focusing in on the time-hopping narrative approach Amy Hennig and her team chose for the experience. This one choice helped to pace and foreshadow some incredible moments, really feeding into our need to see how all of the pieces were going to fit together. And at the heart of it was a simple train, used in several of the game's strongest moments, to drive it all forward. Fitting really that a game would find such energy and locomotion from such a source.

004



PORTAL

■ DEVELOPER: **VALVE CORPORATION** ■ **2007**

Short and sweet, *Portal* does just about everything it sets out to do with aplomb. Its sense of humour, driven entirely through the iconic performance of Ellen McLain and writing of Erik Wolpaw and Chet Faliszek, brings life and tension to what might otherwise have been a fun experiment in game physics. As it is though, the mixture of puzzles, worlds, characters and the gradual reveal of the story all combine to create one harmonious whole. The final confrontation with GLaDOS, pitched beautifully as a defiant last stand by your silent protagonist, is one of the most memorable and fevered boss battles you could ask to experience, and it was all built up in less than three hours of game time. A truly stunning piece of work.

003

POKÉMON RED & BLUE

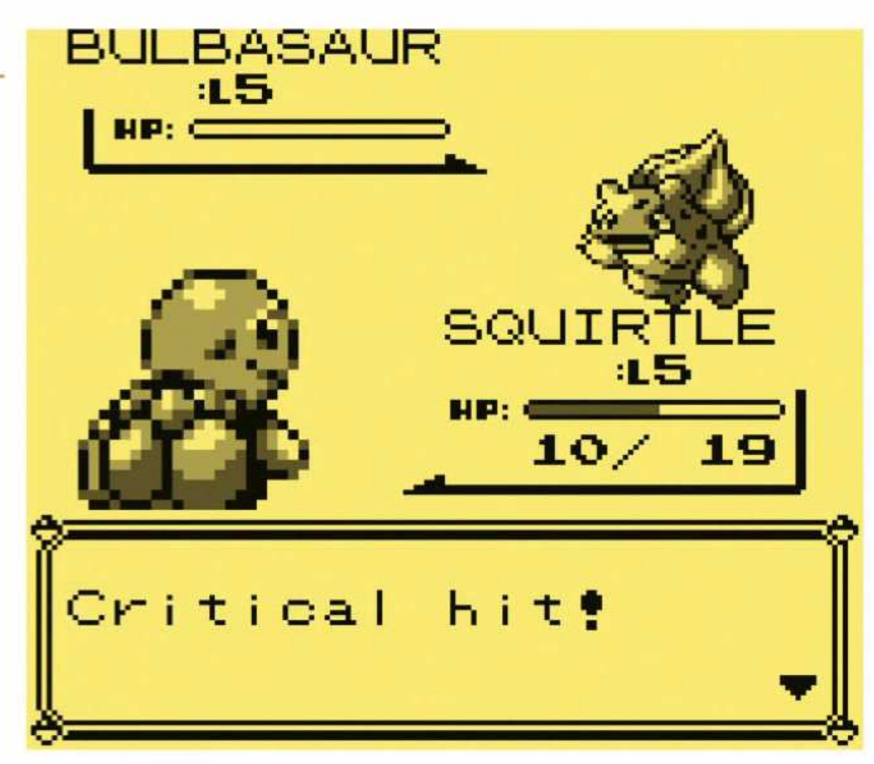
■ DEVELOPER: **GAME FREAK** ■ **1996**

The arrival of *Pokémon Red and Blue* didn't just change videogames; it changed the landscape of popular culture. It's a true masterpiece, dropping us into the sprawling Kanto region in search of the adventure of a lifetime. *Pokémon* offered two primary objectives and, no matter your age, the pursuit of completing them was all encompassing.

The first was to be the very best, like no one ever was. Journeying through a world full of adorable monsters, the goal was to become a Pokémon Master, a title only bestowed upon those that are able to earn eight Gym Badges in challenging tactical battles – elemental wars of attrition – before finally defeating the powerful cabal known at the Elite Four.

The second task was a little more challenging, guided by the ever-present insistence that you've just Gotta Catch 'Em All. 151 collectible creatures were strewn across Kanto, so filling your Pokédex to completion wasn't as easy as throwing your Poké Balls at everything that moved; it also required cooperation with friends – each version of the game containing exclusive monsters – and a deft hand, with some creatures only evolving into new forms after special items were uncovered in the world or through trading with others you encountered.

Pokémon Red and Blue didn't just kick-start a beloved franchise; it also delivered an accessible RPG that could be played, understood and enjoyed by just about anybody with a passing interest in it. The games have grown in size and scope over the decades, but there's a very pure and simple fun to be found in its debut.



002

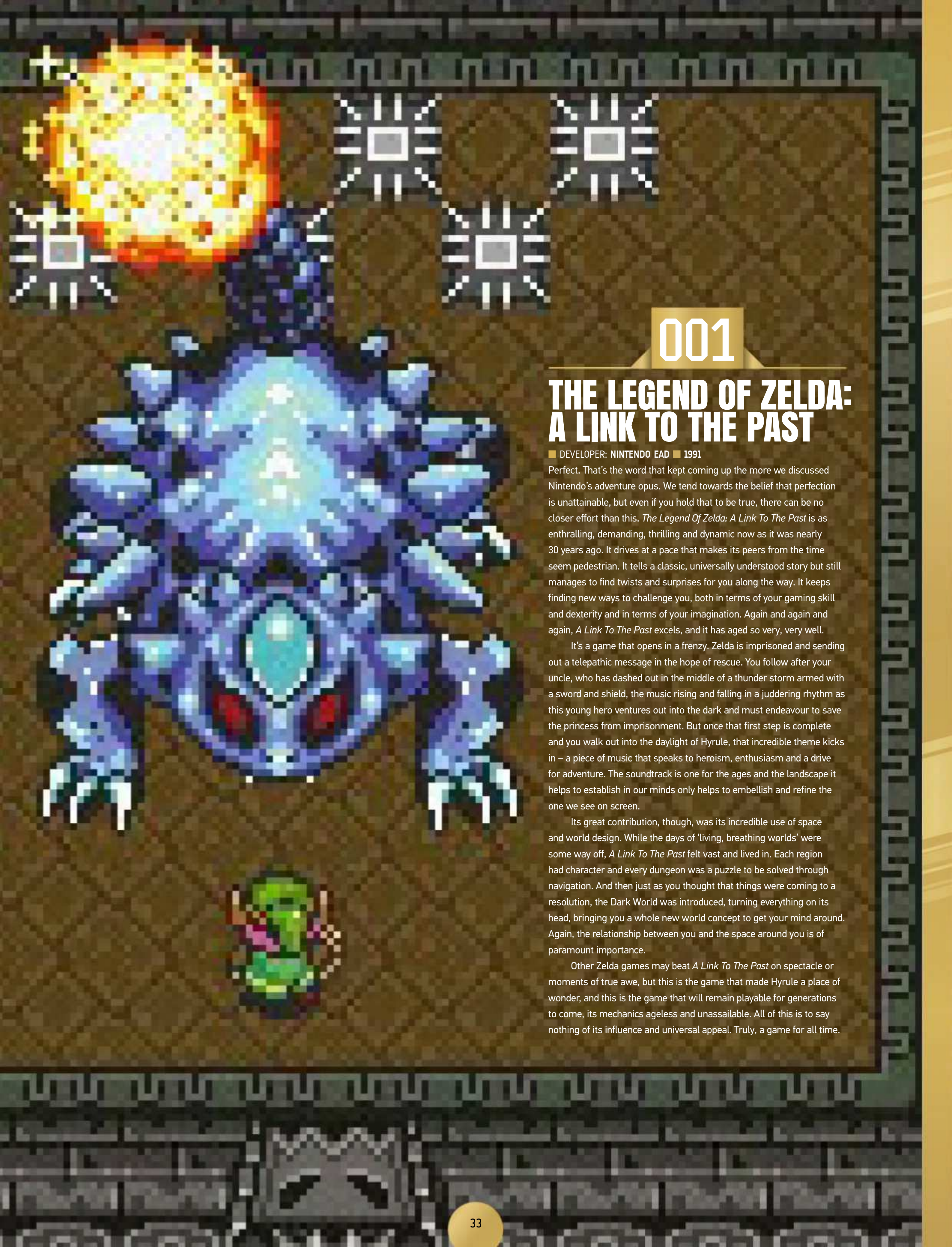
METAL GEAR SOLID

■ DEVELOPER: **KONAMI** ■ **1998**

Metal Gear Solid is a seminal piece of interactive entertainment. It's one of the most popular games of the 32-bit era, *the* essential PlayStation game and without question one of the most influential games ever produced to date. And why is that? Well, it probably has something to do with its revolutionary design, groundbreaking artificial intelligence and unrivalled cinematic scope. Then again, it could just be because one of its bosses knew how much you liked *Castlevania*.

The cinematic scope was particularly impressive back in 1998, with *Metal Gear Solid* setting a new standard for blockbuster storytelling in videogames. Konami wove the game's action together with real-time, in-engine cutscenes that allowed for a seamless transition between play and narration. The tension and immersion of this political thriller was heightened as a result; you weren't just along for the ride, you were thundering through Shadow Moses with a deadline hanging perilously over your head.

It would, of course, be Hideo Kojima's famous attention to detail that would push *Metal Gear Solid* to obtain its legendary status. Its caucus of memorable villains, its ever-impressive ability to shatter the fourth wall, and an array of truly impressive set pieces and scenario designs all come together to ensure that *Metal Gear Solid* is, and will always remain, one of the greatest videogames of all time and a shining example of what is possible within the medium.



001

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST

DEVELOPER: **NINTENDO EAD** **1991**

Perfect. That's the word that kept coming up the more we discussed Nintendo's adventure opus. We tend towards the belief that perfection is unattainable, but even if you hold that to be true, there can be no closer effort than this. *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* is as enthralling, demanding, thrilling and dynamic now as it was nearly 30 years ago. It drives at a pace that makes its peers from the time seem pedestrian. It tells a classic, universally understood story but still manages to find twists and surprises for you along the way. It keeps finding new ways to challenge you, both in terms of your gaming skill and dexterity and in terms of your imagination. Again and again and again, *A Link To The Past* excels, and it has aged so very, very well.

It's a game that opens in a frenzy. Zelda is imprisoned and sending out a telepathic message in the hope of rescue. You follow after your uncle, who has dashed out in the middle of a thunder storm armed with a sword and shield, the music rising and falling in a juddering rhythm as this young hero ventures out into the dark and must endeavour to save the princess from imprisonment. But once that first step is complete and you walk out into the daylight of Hyrule, that incredible theme kicks in – a piece of music that speaks to heroism, enthusiasm and a drive for adventure. The soundtrack is one for the ages and the landscape it helps to establish in our minds only helps to embellish and refine the one we see on screen.

Its great contribution, though, was its incredible use of space and world design. While the days of 'living, breathing worlds' were some way off, *A Link To The Past* felt vast and lived in. Each region had character and every dungeon was a puzzle to be solved through navigation. And then just as you thought that things were coming to a resolution, the Dark World was introduced, turning everything on its head, bringing you a whole new world concept to get your mind around. Again, the relationship between you and the space around you is of paramount importance.

Other Zelda games may beat *A Link To The Past* on spectacle or moments of true awe, but this is the game that made Hyrule a place of wonder, and this is the game that will remain playable for generations to come, its mechanics ageless and unassailable. All of this is to say nothing of its influence and universal appeal. Truly, a game for all time.

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